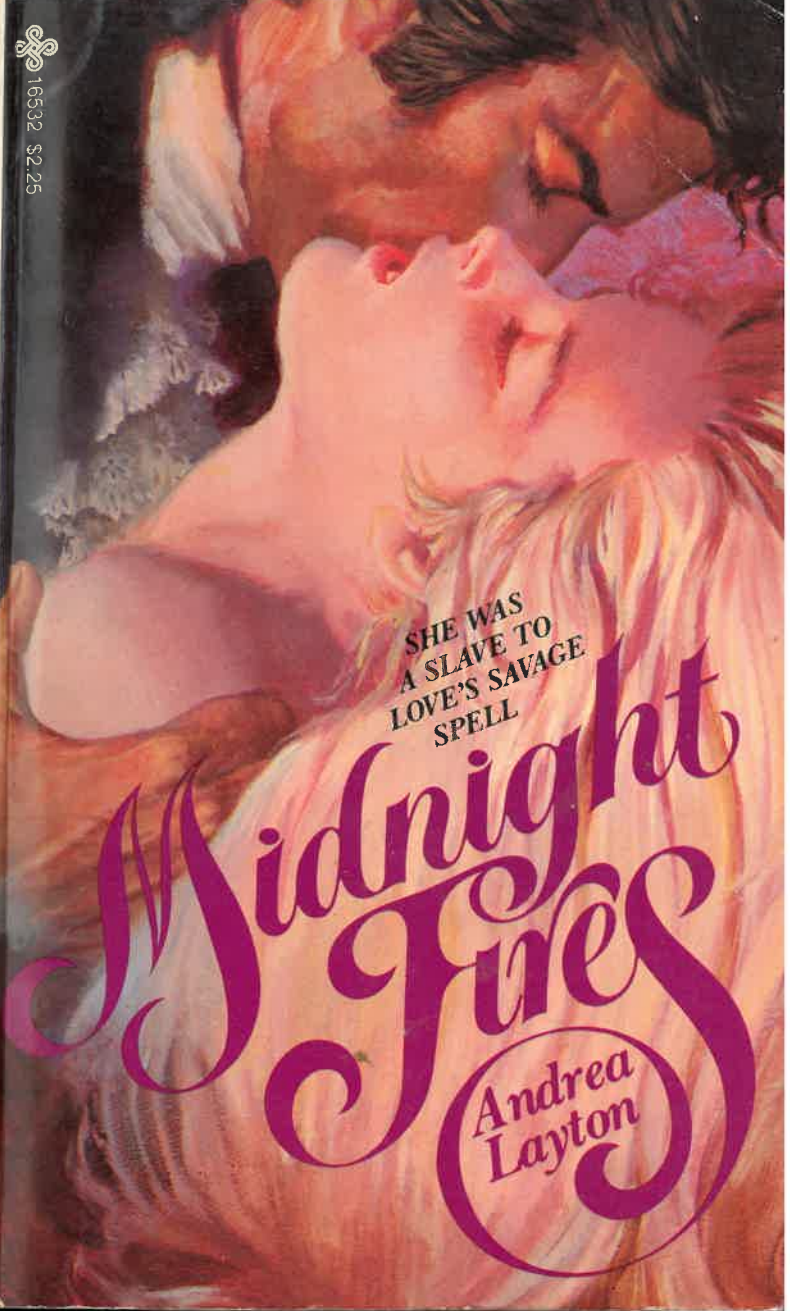
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SHE WAS
A SLAVE TO
LOVE'S SAVAGE
SPELL
Midnight
Fires
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75

BURNING DESIRE

As George gathered leaves for a fire, Carolyn shivered with cold in the dark. Soon he lay down beside her and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close to his chest. Trembling, she pressed herself against his body, seeking more of his warmth.

In the closeness her body tingled with awareness, despite her conscious will to remain still. The warmth of his arms turned to heat—unendurable heat. She struggled to pull away, only to find her body moving of itself, pushing into his embrace. Her lips sought his. She had ceased to think. She could only feel—feel his chest rub against her soft breasts, feel the hardness of his stomach against hers. Wherever their bodies touched, the fire was started. Suddenly she was helpless, wanting him against her will, waiting eagerly for what she knew she should reject in anger...

Midnight Fires

Andrea Layton

PLAYBOY PRESS
PAPERBACKS

MIDNIGHT FIRES

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One

Carolyn Salford braced her legs against the swift flow of the river. Her blond hair, tight with curls, clung damply over the soft curves of her bare breasts. The whisper of running water filled her ears. And yet —had she heard an intruder? Modestly she submerged in the cold water, her eyes wide with apprehension.

Was she in danger? She had heard of wandering hunters who sometimes approached the fort in search of young women. When she was a child, there had been such a kidnapping, and though the men of the fort had scoured the countryside, they had not succeeded in rescuing the terrified victim. Unless she died during the journey, she most probably was a prisoner in one of the bawdy houses in the French colonial town of New Orleans.

With a practiced eye, Carolyn gauged the distance to her horse. If she was in real danger, she would not bother to dress. She could reach Feather in moments, and she would be on her way toward Fort Pitt—and safety. Keeping her shoulders under the water, she worked her way closer to her mount.

When she was as near as she could get without leaving the protection of the stream, she paused and listened again. The rustling had increased. Then, suddenly, a tall figure stepped from the underbrush, and her fright turned to anger—and dismay. "George Nelson! You go away! It isn't polite to bother a girl while she's bathing!"

The voice that answered was filled with resonance —and open amusement. "And it isn't proper for a girl who has a bathtub in her home to come and bathe in the river, like common folk!"

His words made Carolyn aware again of her foolishness. Why had she been so silly? She disliked the wilderness, and yet she had not been able to resist the opportunity to take one last dip in the crystal water of the Ohio River. "Go away. It's too cold to stay here. What do you want with me, anyway?"

The brown eyes that gazed down at her sparkled mischievously. But he did not move.

"Please!" Her teeth were chattering now, and she felt certain her skin was turning blue.

His expression softened. "All right. It's just that you look so lovely." She grimaced, and he sobered. "I'll turn around until you're dressed, if you promise to let me talk to you."

She was desperate. "Close your eyes too!" Before he could do more than turn his back, she began to climb toward the bank of the river. She dried herself on a towel she had flung over a nearby bush. Then she slipped into the gray linsey-woolsey dress that marked her as a pioneer woman. When she was clothed, she glanced toward her horse. If she could reach the mare, she might yet be able to avoid a confrontation with George.

She took one step, then paused. She had promised to listen to him, and listen she would. "You can turn around now." She recoiled as he moved toward her. "What have you to say to me that we haven't said already?"

George's naturally pleasant features were twisted in response to an inner pain. "Carolyn, I have to know. I thought we had an understanding."

"Us? An understanding? How could you have thought such a thing? You are a traitor! You've told me yourself that you want to overthrow the king's rule

in the colonies! Did you think I would go along with your despicable work, just because . . ." She could not continue.

His hands shot out and caught her shoulders. "Stop that nonsense! I never expected you to become involved in what I was doing. Never. How can you be so blind! And how can you be so unconcerned with what is happening in our country?" He chewed on his lips, fighting to control his anger. When he was breathing more evenly, he spoke again. "Please, let's not talk about politics! It doesn't matter between us. I had begun to hope . . ."

"Hope? What hope can a traitor have? I saw the papers my father received. There is a price on your head. You will be captured, sooner or later, and brought to England. And you'll be hanged! What hope is there in such a future?" Her voice broke, and the blue eyes she turned toward him were filled with tears. Brushing angrily at her cheeks, she turned away. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I had hoped, too, for a while."

She was lifted from her feet and crushed against his chest. For one moment she let herself feel the passion that burned in her heart, let herself recognize that his eyes burned into hers with an intensity that left her breathless. Then, suddenly, she began to struggle.

"Let me go! Why do you want to hurt me? I—" A sob caught in her throat. "Can't you give up your stupid fight and stay at the fort, like everyone else? You don't need to fight the king. You don't even need to think about him! He's all the way across the ocean—in England!"

She was standing on the ground again, staring up into the dark, angry face. His voice was brittle. "But his power reaches all the way to Fort Pitt. His governors and his soldiers exact taxes from us like leeches sucking life's blood. We live on a land hundreds of times the

size of England, and King George still thinks he can push us around like lackeys."

Anger wiped away Carolyn's momentary feeling of tenderness. "Don't call my father a leech! He's . . ."

"Your father is different. Don't you know that? I thought you were different, too." His broad shoulders heaved.

She reached out and grasped Feather's reins, but George blocked her. "No! Don't go yet, please!"

She turned her face toward him, her eyes questioning, clouded. "What is there left to say? We had both hoped, maybe. We were wrong. You are too stubborn. If I—if you asked my father for my hand, he would say no."

"Do you say no?"

The tears were beginning again, but he caught her chin and forced her to meet his eyes. She barely whispered her answer. "Yes. There is nothing else I can do."

He drew her to him, crushing her in his arms. His lips found hers, and she gasped, but she could not pull free. She hung on his kiss, feeling the warmth of his breath on her cheek, aware of the pounding of his heart, conscious that her heart was beating with his, that her longing was to remain with him forever.

When he let her go, she stood for a moment, undecided. Then, with a sob, she grasped Feather's mane and pulled herself onto the bare back. The mare lifted her head, nickered nervously, and leaped forward. Carolyn did not look back until the river was out of sight.

The soldiers brought George into the fort at sunset, his hands tied behind his back. Carolyn looked up from her embroidery. A small crowd had gathered around the three soldiers and their captive. Even at a distance, she could sense the awkwardness. George Nelson was not a stranger to the residents of Fort

Pitt. He had grown from boy to man in a small log cabin near the edge of the settlement. The men who led him to prison had been his playmates in the innocent days of childhood.

Carolyn lowered her head, her heart thumping. It was all too painful, even if no one knew how she felt. She was aware of her mother's inquiring eyes, but she showed no response. Only when the narrow path to the small jail was empty did she look up. Then she rose and put her sewing aside. "Mother, will I still be leaving in the morning?"

Elizabeth Salford forced a smile. "Yes, my dear. You'll be on your way. Remember to tell Grandma Genevive to wait to begin her baking until I arrive. Even with her servants, she is too old to handle all the work herself."

"Yes, mama." Carolyn had made that promise before.

Elizabeth led the way into the friendly warmth of the small drawing room. In spite of the rigors of frontier life, she had done her best to maintain a spot of civilization inside her home. "My dear, are you sure this is what you want? You haven't changed your mind?"

"No. William is expecting me." She glanced toward the window. The street was dark, and only a faint tint of gold remained in the purple sky.

"You're thinking of George?" Elizabeth asked.

Carolyn realized, with relief, that she was finally in full control of her emotions. "It wasn't anything, really. He was just another playmate—when I was a child."

Elizabeth's blue eyes met those of her daughter. "You're certain? He never meant anything more?"

Carolyn flushed. "Of course not! Mama! You know I wouldn't . . ."

"Of course not, dear. I'm sure of that. I just want to be certain you know your mind." She released

Carolyn's hands. "Sometimes it is not easy to admit what is in one's heart."

"Well, I know how I feel, mother. I want to marry William. Really I do! I know you love the fort and you share papa's fondness for the wilderness. But I want something more. I want to be a lady, like Grandma Genevive. You should know how I feel. Please, it's all settled."

A cool blast of night air stirred her curls, and Robert Salford stepped into the room. His tall figure, as slender as it had been when he was a youth, filled the frame of the doorway. When he saw Carolyn, he smiled. "There will be a slight change in your plans, my dear. John Haglund will be traveling with you —bringing George to New York. Now that he's captured, I want to get the lad on his way as soon as possible. The jail we have here is far from pleasant." His eyes met Elizabeth's. "John will be leaving the train when he reaches New York. Don't worry, everything has been taken care of."

Carolyn barely noticed his last sentence. Her mind was racing. George would be traveling with her all the way to New York. What a bore! Just when she had succeeded in putting him behind her. But she knew better than to disagree with her father when his face was dark and his brows furrowed. "Yes, papa. Will we start as planned?"

"At dawn. Now, young lady, you had better get to bed. You have a long journey before you."

Two

"Don't shoot! There's a girl up there!"

Carolyn barely heard the shout. Slipping behind a clump of trees, she paused and glanced back at her pursuers. The rough men who had waylaid the caravan appeared to be chasing her, led by George Nelson. Behind them another man bent and lifted the body of John Haglund into his arms and dragged him into a ditch. Carolyn suppressed a cry. He had given his life to defend her—and the load of grain the settlers were sending east. And George Nelson—the prisoner.

With a gasp of alarm, Carolyn turned and ran blindly into the woods. She had seen George break his bonds and throw himself to the ground just before the attack. There was no doubt in her mind. He was more than a traitor. He was one of the mountain men. He made his living preying on helpless travelers!

She stumbled once, then picked herself up and hurried on. She couldn't wait any longer, or stop to think of where she was going.

The journey had started peacefully enough. Long before the sun touched the floor of the valley formed by the Monongahela and Allegheny rivers, ten militiamen had kissed their wives and children, mounted up, and formed a guard around the wagons of grain that were moving east to New York. At their head rode John Haglund and his prisoner, George Nelson. Carolyn, her blond hair shining in the sun and her slender,

tiny frame dwarfed by the bulk of the driver, sat in the first wagon.

She had been so eager to go. Her fair cheeks were rosy with excitement as she kissed her father and mother good-bye. Her best gowns rested behind her in the wagon, and she had not bothered to look back as she left the fort. Even if she never returned—and she hoped she would not—she had no wish to cling to the memories that lay within its walls.

She was panting now, and she paused to catch her breath. And to listen. She was being followed by many pounding feet. Her lungs aching, she resumed her flight. George was one of the mountain men! And to think she had found him attractive! She reached a small meadow and glanced quickly at the sky. Her sense of direction was impeccable. If she continued as she was going, she would reach the fort—and safety.

She paused again to listen. Had the sound of pursuit faded? No. They were still behind her. With a sudden spurt of energy, she broke from the woods and streaked across the meadow. Time was running out. A golden tint was spreading over the clouds, and the blue of the sky had deepened. She could not run all night. Somewhere she would have to find shelter.

Her feet sank into the soggy meadow, and she pulled them free, aware of the sucking *plop* as she labored on. There were twigs in the woods that crackled beneath her, but at least there the ground was dry, protected by the carpet of pine needles and dead leaves. When she reached the woods once more, she glanced back. There was no one in sight.

But the sounds of pursuit had not ceased. Somewhere in the growing darkness behind her, men were searching. She shuddered. Sheltered as her childhood had been, she knew what could happen to a woman alone if she were caught by the mountain men.

It had all been so sudden. A day had passed in dull monotony. Hal, her companion on the wagon,

was not given to much talk, and her father had refused to allow her to ride her own horse, delicate, swift little Feather. Colonel Robert Salford seemed unwilling to admit that his daughter was a woman grown!

Carolyn lifted her skirts to her knees and hurried on. Her mother was little better! She had been forced to sit with Hal instead of riding beside John and George. She had watched them, when she wasn't dozing, and she had noticed that they seemed to have a great deal to talk about. The thought angered her. George was probably trying to convince John that he should set him free! Maybe it was best, after all, that she had not been riding beside him! They would have fought, for sure.

A dry branch tore at her skirt and she pulled it loose. If she had been mounted on Feather, she'd have been dressed in trousers and a shirt, not in skirts that hung up on every bare twig!

But if she had been on horseback, she might now lie dead beside the others! She had not stayed long enough to see all that happened, but a swift glance before she lost herself in the woods had revealed no sign of life among the travelers. Except for George Nelson! He had anticipated the attack by only a second, but it had been enough to save him from the gunfire.

A burning in her chest forced her to rest. Leaning against a tree, she looked frantically about. There was no good place for her to hide. None of the trees were strong enough to hold her weight, and the foliage was too sparse this early in spring to conceal her even if she did succeed in finding branches she could climb.

Slightly to her right, she heard the sound of running water. Pushing her way through a thick stand of brush, she emerged from the woods and scurried along the bank of the small stream. If darkness came before she was caught, she might shield herself under the overhang of mixed rock and wet dirt that edged the swollen

brook. Until then, the smooth bank offered a clear path for her flight.

Her foot slipped on a damp rock and she grabbed a slender tree for support. The water below looked cold, and surprisingly deep. There were places where it undercut the bank severely. She shuddered. The stream would cut the shortest path to the valley—and safety. But it did not provide the most secure foundation.

Once more she glanced up at the sky. All the clouds were glowing red against the deep blue, but darkness would not settle in for some time. Never had sunset taken so long! She paused and listened again. Over the sound of the stream, she could still hear the pounding of pursuit.

She turned and continued her flight, her mind searching for the quickest way back to shelter. What a disaster! Just when she thought that at last her dilemma was over.

It had not been easy for her to decide between George Nelson, the wild, undisciplined youth who had sat beside her in the tiny schoolhouse when she was a child, and William Jaeger, the smooth, sophisticated lieutenant who had visited the fort a year ago, just before her seventeenth birthday. Yet in a way, there had been no decision to make. George treated her more like a boy than a woman, and William behaved toward her as if she were dressed in silks and satins.

But her father had not been willing to give his consent to William's proposal of marriage. Carolyn flushed in memory of the embarrassment. She had been told she was too young to know truly how she felt. Too young! When she had friends her age who already had babies! But her eagerness had not swayed her parents. Her father had informed the young officer that he would have to wait until she was eighteen.

She paused to listen. Were the footsteps closer? Gasping for breath, she hurried on.

She was eighteen now. And Grandma Genevive had

included a note with her invitation to the Easter Ball. William Jaeger was going to be present. It could not have arrived at a better moment.

Because George was beginning to court her. Secretly, of course. He had left the fort when he was eighteen, the summer before William's visit, and when he returned he had become a man. A man with convictions that made him into an outlaw. He visited among the settlers and spoke of rebellion and independence. And for reasons Carolyn could not understand, her father did not immediately arrest him.

When the colonel from Boston visited, her father changed. George was forced to leave the fort to avoid capture. But he did not leave the lush *Y* of the two rivers. He hid instead in the woods, talking to the settlers while they were working their farms. And somehow, for a long time, he was not caught.

He seemed to encounter Carolyn far more often than mere accident would allow. Still, she didn't realize his intent until fall, when he tried to speak to her of love. She had been surprised—and upset.

"George! What are you trying to do? It's bad enough I don't tell papa where you are. You know I only keep your secret because we were friends when we were little."

He had caught her hands in his. "Is that the only reason, Carolyn? Have you no feelings for me at all?"

She met his eyes, but under their burning gaze, she felt a blush creep over her cheeks. What was the answer to his question? Could she deny the dreams he had inspired in her heart when he returned, tall and grown, after a two-year absence?

He watched as she lowered her eyes, and then suddenly he bent and kissed her full on the lips. His hands moved around her waist, pulling her close.

Taken by surprise, Carolyn had no strength to pull away. She felt the pounding of his heart, felt herself grow breathless in his arms. But most of all she felt

a sudden shock. This was not like the kiss she had received from William Jaeger when he proposed to her! This kiss left her faint with longing for some undefinable more. Frightened, she pulled herself free.

"Don't, please." She was trembling, but she struggled to hide her upset. And then, before he had time to answer, she had run back to the safety of the fort.

She had assumed he had left the area when the winter began. As snow blanketed the fields, she wondered more than once how he was faring. And where he had gone. She felt a relief, too. His kiss had threatened her carefully laid plans to escape the wilderness and take residence in one of the big cities in the colonies. When his face forced itself into her thoughts, she pushed it away.

She did not succeed, however, in banning her dreams of him. They disturbed her rest during the long winter nights until, at last, she resigned herself to their presence. They were dreams, after all. Nothing more. They would cease once she lay in William's bed—his wedded bride.

When the messenger arrived with the warrant for George's arrest, she felt shocked. Somehow she had not expected him to get into any real trouble. Something else had happened, too. The people of the fort suddenly became secretive. More than once she realized that they stopped speaking when she or her father approached them.

When George surprised her at the river, she knew why. They had been hiding him in their homes! With winter over, he was free to make his escape. But he had not fled. And now he was behind her, tracking her in the darkness. Leading a motley band of mountain men in their pursuit of a new victim.

As she dodged around a tree, just stopping a slide into the water, Carolyn thought of her brother, Roy, who had been forced to stay behind with their parents. At fourteen, he was still physically a child, but

his love of adventure made him a perfect partner for exploration around the fort. In a way Carolyn had regretted leaving him behind, though her trip without the family did prove her superiority as the eldest. Yet she could not deny that he would have been a help in the chase that pushed her beyond her endurance.

She paused and listened again. The woods around her were silent. Nervously, she glanced down at her gray-blue gown. She hated the frontier costume almost as much as she hated the frontier. The drab color was so different from the lovely pastels and deep dyes used by the clothmakers in England! When she married William she would never again wear such ugly clothes!

The usual sounds of the evening were missing. Someplace behind her men were still searching the forest. If only her father were here! For the first time since her sixteenth birthday she realized how much his protection meant to her. He would guide her—find a place for her to rest.

But she was alone! And he had taught her the ways of the woods, in spite of her lack of interest and her impatience with such coarse living. If only she had paid closer attention! She might be missing the best shelter only because of her ignorance.

But why had her mother objected to William Jaeger? Like Carolyn's father, he wore the bright red uniform of the Royal British Army. And he was such a gentleman! Not at all like George Nelson.

Once more Carolyn paused, leaning against the trunk of a tree for support. Why had her father seemed so reluctant to send George packing to Boston for transport to England? The man was a traitor! He had been caught trying to entice some of the settlers to revolt!

She heard a noise behind her and quickly resumed her flight. Just wait until she got back to the fort and told her father that George was a mountain man! Then he'd be sorry he had been so sympathetic!

The sun was gone, but a faint afterglow still lit the stream with an orange incandescence. Above her a jay sounded a warning. Her feet dragging over the rock-strewn overhang, Carolyn pressed on. She was breathing heavily, hardly aware that she was speaking to herself. "Just a little more. You'll be safe when it gets dark."

Suddenly a twig crackled in the woods behind her. She half-turned in alarm, her eyes flitting over the bare branches of a nearby tree in search of some safe perch. And then, abruptly, her ankle twisted on a sharp rock and the earth under her feet gave way.

She cried out in alarm and flailed the air for support, but there was nothing for her to grasp. With a scream she felt herself slip and then she was in the icy water, kicking and sputtering, trying to gain her footing on the wet, slimy rocks.

An uproarious laugh drew her attention upward. George Nelson towered above her, his hands resting on the soft suede of his Indian-style breeches, his fringed Indian blouse hugging the breadth of his strong chest. His long, sturdy legs were braced apart, and his eyes sparkled with amusement.

Carolyn brushed her wet skirt down over her ankles. "Help me out! Don't just stand there and laugh!"

George roared louder, bending backward in abandon. "You—" He struggled to control his laughter. "You look like a plucked chicken."

Sputtering angrily, Carolyn regained her feet and held out her hand. "Help me out. I'm freezing!"

Still chuckling merrily, George braced himself against the trunk of a tree and grasped her wrist. With one forceful jerk he pulled her from the water and swung her to the shore. She stumbled as her feet touched the bank, but before she could fall again, his arms encircled her and pulled her close.

The suddenness of his embrace startled her. She ought to push him away. But he felt so warm. . . . He

acted while she was still deciding what to do. His lips drew close and then he kissed her, his breath hot on her cheek, his arms pulling her tight. She felt the skin of her lips pressing hard against her teeth, felt the pressure of his body against hers, felt . . . something . . . grow between them.

In spite of her dislike for him, she let herself melt forward into his embrace. She knew she should struggle, knew she ought to fight him away. But she was so . . . tired. And so cold.

Abruptly he released her, and she felt the cold air rush in to blow away the little warmth he had lent her. "Come, they're still after us. We must move quickly."

"You're one of them. I saw!"

He frowned. "You imagined it. I only sensed their presence moments before they appeared. I have no use for raiders. And your friends saw to it that I had no weapon with which to fight." He grabbed her wrist and pulled her away from the stream. "I'm sorry they got John and the others. They were good men, and the cause needs all the men it can get."

The flush of anger that diffused her face made Carolyn forget her discomfort. All the men the cause can get, indeed. "They're loyal soldiers. They aren't traitors, like you."

She felt herself twirled around and once more she was crushed in his arms. "Carolyn Salford, that is enough! Do you want me to leave you to the mercy of the mountain men?" She shook her head, aware that her features were suddenly pinched with fear. "Then say no more about traitors or loyalists—or rebels. We have far to go before we can feel safe. Now come."

He took her wrist again and hurried on, his eyes focused before him, a woodsman reading the path as he moved forward.

Carolyn tugged at his hand until her wrists broke

free and then, lifting her skirt up so the wetness did not flap against her legs, she followed. A cold breeze stirred the full drape of her gown and she shivered. Her body felt numb, her thoughts flitted aimlessly from her danger to how cold she was. But she would not lower herself to ask for his pity.

When he paused a moment to consider their path, she listened to the sounds behind them. Darkness had at last wrapped itself around them. But were they still being followed? No. The small creatures of the woods were moving about, and the pounding of feet that had kept her running was gone.

"Here, pull this over your shoulders." George had taken his shirt off and held it out to her. "I'm sorry. I didn't think of how cold you'd be." He pulled her into a small clearing and guided her to a big tree that stood alone. "Sit here. I'll start a fire."

Swiftly he cleared the ground of leaves and formed a bed of rocks. Carolyn's teeth chattered as she watched him build a pile of sticks and then set them afire with a spark from his flint. Trembling, she rose and moved closer to the flame.

He lowered his eyes as she approached. "Please, you must understand. You can't stay in those wet clothes. You must take them off."

She did not move.

"You don't want to freeze to death, do you?" His voice was sharp.

"No. But . . ." Silently she rose and slowly began to take her clothes off. Words would not protect her now.

But he did not approach her except to take her wet garments from her stiff fingers. When she was naked, she pulled his shirt over her head and squatted on the ground next to the fire. Even in the gloom she could see that George was abashed at the sight of her nudity, and the tightness that made her body quiver was reflected in his stiff jaw and the taut muscles in his shoulders.

She let her mind wander as she huddled close to the heat, waiting for him to return from gathering leaves for a fire. His chest was sprinkled with a dark bush of curly hair. And the muscles rippled as he moved. So strong he was. But was he to be trusted? She moved close to the fire and picked up a loose rock. Its warmth traveled up her arm, pushing back the deathly cold. The weight felt good in her hand. If he attacked her, she would defend herself.

But when George reappeared, he hardly looked in her direction. He was carrying an armload of moss and leaves which he dropped to the ground, and he began immediately to dig a hollow in the loose, fresh dirt. Carolyn watched with growing interest. He did not stop until the depression was five feet long, two feet wide, and close to six inches deep.

When he had lined the depression with the dry leaves and moss, he squatted beside her. "I'm going to need my shirt so I can hunt. If you lie down in the bed I've made, you will be warm." He still did not meet her eyes.

She caught her breath. He was so close! Her fingers loosened and the rock fell to the ground. She could not hit him, not even if he tried to take advantage of her nakedness.

Silently she pulled the shirt over her head and held it out to him. If he cared at all for her honor, he would not touch her. But if he did . . . She would not give him the satisfaction of hearing her plead.

She felt the weight of the garment lifted from her hands, and she moved quickly to the hollow. The moss felt soft under her body, and strangely warm. Lying down, she tried to release the tension that held her stiff, and when she failed, she folded her hands over the soft down that grew over the *V* between her legs. She felt hot in spite of the chill of the night.

He pulled the shirt over his head and bent down toward her. Tensing her body, she waited for his

touch, but it did not come. Instead she felt the soft, velvet moss cover her. Warmth crept into her frozen feet. Her shivering was stilled.

"George . . ."

He stood above her, his shoulders squared. "Yes, Carolyn?"

There was nothing to say that had not already been said. "Nothing." He turned to go. "Wait. When we return to the fort, maybe I can get my father to ask for a pardon for you."

His lips turned up in a wry grin. "It would be of no value. I have no intention of changing my views." His eyes were dark. "I fight for a principle. I fight for the freedom of a nation."

She felt a flush of annoyance. "A nation? What nation? We are subjects of the Crown. I don't understand what you're talking about."

He towered above her, his arms braced on his hips. The smile on his face brought a flush of anger to her cheeks. To think that she had offered to plead for his release! When he spoke his voice was gentle. "I think, my dear, that this is no time for talk."

Before she could answer, he was gone.

In the silence that followed his departure, she allowed herself to think back on the day that had just ended. What a terrible time it had been! John Haglund killed with one shot. She shuddered as the memory of his dead face returned. It had been so sudden!

There were the others, too. Emil Johnson, Greg Voorsanger, Edgar Plapp . . . One by one she reviewed the names and faces of the men who had fallen in the attack. They were gone—all gone! Every one had left a widow, and some had children.

A sob caught in her throat. Close as she had been to the wilderness, death had never impressed itself upon her before. There had been those natural ends to long lives—and there had been the time when Mary

Haglund had lost her newborn infant. Their only child —born late in their lives. And now John was dead. Mary would never have another chance at motherhood.

The sadness crept over her, and she began to weep. This morning she had been so happy! And now . . .

Now she had a problem. What would William Jaeger say about her adventure? She had mentioned him to George as a reminder that she belonged to another. If George was at all a gentleman, he would respect her. But even if he remained considerate and proper, would William Jaeger understand? Would he be able to accept the knowledge that she had spent time with another man—and would he believe that her modesty remained intact?

Maybe she would do well to keep information about her trip with George a secret. A girl's reputation could be ruined by such an accident as this, even if nothing untoward took place.

Still . . . The small devil crept out from its hiding place, daring her to push it back. Alone with George, far from the fort, she felt suddenly confused once more. She had put him behind her. Now he confronted her with his strong masculinity. She had almost succeeded in banishing him from her dreams. Now he rose before her to threaten her waking hours.

Impatiently she forced such thoughts from her mind. She had made her decision. She was engaged to William Jaeger! How could she forget it? Grandma Genevive was already preparing the wedding feast! And with William she would have all she had dreamed of since she was a tiny child. Silk gowns. No more dressing in rough wools! Fine shoes—delicate slippers. Balls instead of dances held in a barn still smelling of cows and dry hay. Servants to cater to her every whim.

All this was hers as William's wife! Then why did she find her heart increasing its beat when George

smiled? Deliberately forcing back her emotions, she focused her attention on her plans for the future—with William.

How often she had dreamed of living in a mansion like the one that was home to her foster grandparents! How many times she had tripped lightly over the rough wooden floors of her mother's drawing room, dreaming that she was dancing at a cotillion!

Her dearest wish was to visit the English court, to have the honor of being presented to the king, to have a chance to walk proudly through the corridors of the palace on the arm of her husband, aware of the envious glances of her associates. She wanted to visit Williamsburg, where the governor of the colonies lived, and Boston, far north of New York, where the tides were high and sailing vessels departed to brave the dangers of the wide sea. She wanted to stand on the deck of such a ship and feel the waves hammer at the hull and watch the sails billow above her. She wanted—she wanted the kind of exciting life her mother had enjoyed!

A cold breeze pushed icy fingers into her blanket of moss and leaves. In the darkness on the far side of the fire, she heard footsteps shuffling through the underbrush. Many footsteps. The mountain men had found her after all!

Trembling, she gazed wide-eyed at the flickering shadows. Her impulse was to break away and run, but common sense held her motionless. A naked girl running through the woods would attract pursuit. If only George would return!

"Look what I found!" A horse nuzzled at George's shoulder.

She exhaled, suddenly aware that she had been holding her breath. "Why didn't you say something? You frightened me!"

Once more his laugh echoed through the woods. "You think they're still around? Don't be foolish!

They were after the grain—and they got it. They need the wagons and horses, too—but they don't need women. They have females of their own."

She chose to ignore the slight on her importance. "Where did you find the horse?"

"Grazing close to the stream. It looks as if a bullet nicked his leg, but it isn't broken. I'll see in the morning if he can carry a passenger." He tied the reins to a branch and squatted by the fire. Pulling a knife from the top of his boot, he prepared the rabbit he had killed for roasting. When it was sputtering over the fire, he removed his shirt and tossed it onto the ground beside her.

Soon the fragrance of freshly cooked meat filled the air. Carolyn crawled from her bed, pulled on the shirt, and crouched near the fire, inhaling deeply of the pleasant odor. She was hesitant about speaking, afraid she might light anew the fire that burned in his heart. A new timidity added to her reserve. She was indebted too much to him already. The less that passed between them, the better.

When the food was gone, she lay down in the shallow bed while George put out the fire. The breeze that had stirred the trees earlier had grown stronger. He moved slowly, carefully covering each spark. She needed no explanation for his actions. One live coal could start a fire that would destroy the forest.

She shivered convulsively. Without the fire she felt sure she would freeze before morning. Even George's shirt was not enough to protect her from the biting wind.

George squatted beside her bed, his bare arms glowing in the pale moonlight. "Carolyn."

She met his gaze, but she did not speak.

"It's too cold for me to spend the night with no jacket, and the leaves are not enough to keep you warm. I've checked your dress and petticoats. They are still very damp. So"—he reached down and helped

her to rise—"there is only one solution. We must sleep together, so we will warm each other." She raised her hand in protest. "Please. Why die of cold, after we've escaped death from musket fire? We can share the hollow. I'll make it deeper and put some of the warm rocks underneath the padding of leaves and grass to build up the heat. If you stay close to the big tree you won't be hit quite so hard by the wind."

She watched as he worked and then, impatient to regain the warmth she had been forced to abandon, she began to assist him. Together they soon had the depression deepened by another six inches. The dirt they removed they piled on both sides, as a break against the wind. Then George dug the hot rocks from the firebed and pushed them into the dirt. Over them he spread a layer of fresh leaves and grass.

When at last he helped her to remove his shirt and crawl back into the bed, she was shivering with cold. Her bare feet were icy, and her fingers were stiff. Immediately he crawled beside her, his body fitting against her back. With one arm he spread his jacket over their shoulders and pulled over it the pile of leaves he had gathered. Then he lay down and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close to his chest.

She felt the roughness of his hair against her back and his big, work-roughened hands rub against her breasts. His fingers, at first cold and hesitant, quickly grew warm. His breath caressed her neck and when he shifted restlessly behind her it touched the softness of her cheek. Still trembling, she pressed herself against his body, seeking more of his warmth.

In the closeness she felt something hard grow until it pressed against her backside. Her body tingled with awareness, pulsating faintly, despite her conscious will to remain still. She felt the muscles of her legs contract, and he stirred in response. George's heart pounded against her back, and her own echoed its rhythm.

The warmth of his arms turned to heat—unendurable, burning heat. Struggling to quiet her trembling, she pulled away, only to find her body moving of itself, turning toward him, pushing into his embrace. Her lips sought his. She had ceased to think. She could only feel—feel the hair on his chest rub against her soft breasts, feel the hardness of his stomach against hers, feel the pounding of his heart and the echo of her own.

"Oh, Carolyn." His voice was like velvet. "Carolyn. I love you so!"

Her lips stilled his words.

Far back in her mind a small voice protested. *Push him away. Run!* But her body refused to listen to the warnings. Her legs tingled, and the sensation moved up to her abdomen. Wherever their bodies touched, the fire was started. She was helpless, wanting him against her will, waiting eagerly for what she knew she should reject in anger.

He slipped gently between her thighs and she let them move apart in answer to his will. *It* was pressing against her most secret parts, but she felt no fear, only a longing that brought her legs even farther apart and that caught her breath.

She felt him fumble with his breeches and then, suddenly, he lifted her out of the covering of leaves and held her up as he spread his shirt beneath her. She was vaguely aware of the cool breeze lapping at the fever in her body. Now *it* lay free between them, hard and demanding, pushing into her softness, pushing and throbbing. She gasped in anticipation of pain.

Her fear vanished as he pushed into her with a sudden, short pressure. For one moment she wondered why the hurt had been so slight, and then she thought no more.

George had known other women; few men of his acquaintance had not. But they had been loose creatures who took on anyone for money. Yet from them

he had learned enough to be patient. He lay still inside her, waiting for her feminine response, waiting for her passion to grow equal to his own. His breath was hot against her cheek. "Carolyn, I love you. I want you—always."

She barely heard his words. A warmth was swelling inside her. The tingling that had started in her legs filled her body, and she began slowly to undulate her hips. With each breath her movements grew stronger. The heady muskiness of his body filled her consciousness. She was drowning in his love.

She gasped, and wondered at the cry of passion that assailed her ears. Was that her voice? He breathed her name again and began to move. Slowly the long hardness of his passion pushed her down and when he pulled up, she rose to meet him. He was in her again, filling her with his love, with his longing. "Oh, my dearest." His breath was a moan. "I love you so."

Closing her eyes, she let herself float helplessly in his arms. She thought it was his passion that pulled them ever closer, but her legs braced to keep him near and her arms held him to her. She was drifting—drifting.

When the shaking began, she clung to him in terror. She was dying! But his lips touched her cheeks, her eyes, reassuring her, bringing her back from the brink and then holding her as together they convulsed in wild passion. Carolyn gasped as her mind exploded. She was crying out, calling his name, holding him close, pressing herself against him. And the small voice was stilled. She belonged to George. She always would. In her heart she knew it.

They lay together, locked in an embrace neither wanted to break, until at last the sounds of the woods returned. A breeze touched her moist skin, lapping up the wetness that lay between them. She shivered convulsively.

Gently he restored their bed to order, covering her

with moss, fitting his moist body against hers. And then, his arms holding her close, he grew still. His breathing became steady.

But sleep did not come easily to her. For the first time since the madness had assailed her, she was aware of the enormity of what had happened between them. She was engaged to William Jaeger. She loved William Jaeger. George Nelson was a boy she had put behind her when she had made that decision. And now?

Now everything was topsy-turvy! She had given herself to George without protest, without even fighting for her honor!

It would have been all right with William, she knew that. They were going to be married. But George? He was a traitor, a rebel against the Crown, a man her father would never accept.

A man she could never accept. She wanted far more out of life than he could give. All he could offer a woman was early widowhood, for he would surely be captured, sooner or later, and sent to the gallows.

She struggled to find some solution to her problem, but her mind rebelled. His arms were too gentle around her, his chest too warm against her back. He murmured in his sleep, and his fingers tightened around her hand.

With a sigh she abandoned her inner battle. There would be time to decide what she should do. There would be time. Tomorrow—when her clothes were dry, and he was not so agonizingly close.

Three

"Good morning." George's eyes, as he met hers, were filled with a new glow. "Your clothes are dry."

Carolyn sat up, her mind still hazy with sleep. She had had a most exciting dream! She had dreamt . . . A flush colored her cheek when she thought of it. What a dream for a girl who was engaged to be married! She had dreamt that George . . . Appalled by the thought, her consciousness refused to focus on her nighttime fantasy.

So shaken was she that she dared not even look at the strong shoulders that blocked her view of the fire. He was cooking a fish, and the fragrance made her mouth water and her stomach rumble. Strange that she should feel so ravenous when she had eaten just before she went to sleep!

Thankful that he was not facing her, she slipped from under his deerskin jacket. In spite of her resolve, she could not keep her thoughts from returning to her dreams, as if, somehow, understanding it was important. In her dream George Nelson had said he loved her. She smiled in amusement. How ridiculous. He was a rebel—and she was engaged to William Jaeger.

But more had happened in her dream than just an exchange of words. He had . . . A flush suffused her face and breasts. What a wild dream that had been!

Her glance drifted down the smooth lines of her body. Like any good, modest girl of her time, she was not in the habit of looking at herself unclothed.

But something about her dream drew her eyes downward. Her dream—and a crusty dryness on her thighs mingled with an excess of moisture between her legs.

She gasped in sudden recollection. It had not been a dream at all! The entire experience flooded into her memory. The cold, her wet clothes and the way they chilled her body. The nearness of his flesh against hers. The feel of the hairs on his chest against her back. Her need for comfort and . . . Too embarrassed to confront him with his perfidy, she grabbed her clothes from the branch and stumbled to the stream.

She shivered as the cold water closed around her ankles, but her determination to wash off the evidence of her fall from virtue overcame her physical discomfort. Tossing her dress and petticoats onto the bank, she began to splash water on the telltale stains that marred the whiteness of her thighs. And only when she was completely clean did she step back to the shore and pull on her garments.

It was then she realized she had forgotten her slippers beside the fire. Turning, she watched the flames as they reached the fish George held on an outstretched stick. They sputtered and sizzled, releasing a delicious fragrance. She was so hungry.

Yet she resisted the impulse to hurry back. She had to think first. Should she obey her instinctive desire to run, to get as far away as she could from a man who took advantage of her when she was helpless? She wanted to desperately. Yet she couldn't go without her shoes. Her feet were still too tender from a winter of wearing boots.

And then there was the horse. If he could carry her, she would surely outdistance George. And she wouldn't need her shoes at all! She moved toward the animal, then stopped. There had been something said about a bullet that nicked his leg. If he was injured, she couldn't ride him. And then she would have to stay around long enough to get properly dressed.

As she wavered, her initial shock at realizing her dream had not been a dream at all began to wear away—to be replaced by a growing anger. How could he do such a thing? He had said he never took a girl who wasn't willing, that she remembered. And then he proceeded to take her almost as soon as they lay down!

She brushed aside the nagging reminder that she had contributed to her own downfall. Her consciousness refused to confront the memory of that first kiss, when she had turned and sought his lips.

He had said he loved her. He had used every ploy he could to soften her resistance. He had taken advantage of her in a most shameful manner!

Fuming, she approached the fire. The outrage she felt wiped all thoughts of his tenderness from her mind. Her father would surely horsewhip George when he learned of this!

Silently planning what she would say when she faced him, she knelt and pulled on her slippers. She would tell him . . . She would make him understand how despicable he had been! Thoroughly worked up, she rose and looked into his face.

"What a wonderful day it is, my darling." As he spoke, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her gently.

His action sent her head spinning. This was not what she had planned. A man who had just raped a woman against her will didn't treat her with love! And then the pressure of his arms and the closeness of his body mingled with the musky fragrance of his manhood, chasing away all her anger. He loved her. And she . . .

And she was engaged to William Jaeger!

Bracing her hands against George's chest, she pushed herself free of his encircling arms. "How could you?" She was trembling, and she tried desperately to tell

herself it was from fury. "How could you do this to me, when you knew I belonged to another?"

His face registered shock which changed to confusion. "What's the matter, Carolyn? You know I love you. You must have known. I've loved you ever since—" He paused. "—for as long as I can remember! And you love me! I know it. I've seen it in your eyes." His eyes took on a dreamy expression. "We'll be so good together! You're everything I need in a woman: proud, independent—free. A worthy bride for a citizen of this new country of America."

She shook her head, sputtering furiously. "Citizen of America? Whatever are you talking about? My father is a loyal soldier of the Crown, and I'm going to marry a lieutenant in the British Army. A man who knows his responsibility to the king of England. I've never said I loved you!" She pushed aside memories of her past feelings. They were dead. They had never really had life.

He reached for her, but she pulled back. "Don't touch me! How could you take advantage of my fright? And the cold? How could you?"

The expression on his face changed from confusion to hurt. "It meant that to you? After what we shared, you can speak of last night as if I had forced myself on you?" He stared at her in silence and then suddenly he was calm—and very distant. "If that's what you wish, I'm sorry. It won't happen again, I promise you."

A feeling of loss overwhelmed her. If he loved her —truly loved her—he would take her in his arms again, even though she protested. Biting her lips to keep them from trembling, she crouched beside the fire and broke off a piece of the fish. But somehow she wasn't hungry anymore. Now it was her heart that was empty. She remembered her decision to run from him, but her strength was gone. Because she had said her piece,

she felt tied to him, tied by her wish that she had remained silent.

When the fish was eaten and the fire extinguished, George studied the horse's leg in silence. His face was solemn when he rose. "I'm afraid we can't use him. Not yet. His leg is too sensitive. I'd shoot him if it were worse, but he's a good beast, and it looks as if he'll recover if we don't hurry him. I don't think he'll have any trouble walking behind us. I'll need him later. I move too slowly on foot, and I can't afford another animal—not now, at least."

Carolyn started to speak and then fell silent. She felt disappointed. She had hoped . . .

She had hoped to be back with her father before nightfall, and now she would have to spend another night with George. If he weren't a fugitive, they could use the road, like decent travelers, and spend the night in a settler's cottage. But she knew he dared not let loyal people know he had escaped the disaster that had ended in John Haglund's death. Not until he had made his escape. Unless she chose to go alone, she had no way of avoiding another night in the wilderness with him.

They walked in single file along the bank of the stream, Carolyn first and then George, leading the horse. The first time she stumbled, his arm reached out to catch her, and she pulled away angrily. But soon she realized she could not remain quite that independent. She didn't want another dunking.

One thing was certain. She had no desire to talk further with the man who had so outraged her maidenhood. He had ruined her life, and all he could say was that he was sorry!

Ruined her life . . .

She tried vainly to resurrect the feeling of elation she had enjoyed when the trip began and she was thinking of her impending marriage to William Jaeger.

But all she could think of now was her terrible predicament.

Would William want her now that she was no longer a virgin? She brushed the thought aside. Of course he would! He loved her. He had expressed his desire for her hand long ago, and he had written often in the intervening years, his letters filled with passion and longing. Of course William still wanted her! Forcing her attention to the narrow trail she had to traverse, she tried valiantly to ignore the possibility that she might no longer want him.

Gnawing at her consciousness was the memory of how wholeheartedly she had responded to George's advances. Was that the way a woman who loved another man would behave? Terrified at the implications of the thought, she pushed it aside. How could she love George Nelson? He had proven himself unworthy of love when he left the fort without declaring himself and returned a stranger, with traitorous plans, so different she hardly knew him!

And she didn't want to know him! All she wanted from him was to be left alone—after he brought her to Fort Pitt. She wouldn't feel safe from the mountain men until then.

The vision of John Haglund with a bullet through his head pushed itself into her consciousness. How violent! When she was married to William she would be able to leave such terror behind. In New York people were civilized. And in London! Why, in London there was culture—theaters and beautiful art. When she was married to William, she would be a lady.

She cast a glance back at George, but she turned quickly when she caught his eye. William wasn't a bit like George. He would never attack a woman as George had! He was a gentleman. And gentlemen didn't do such things. They asked for a woman's hand in mar-

riage first. And then they waited until the vows had been exchanged.

The memory of her compliance—no, her enthusiasm—finally penetrated her thoughts. George wasn't entirely to blame. But as quickly as she had admitted it, she banished the idea. If he had been a gentleman, he wouldn't have betrayed her trust.

The sounds of the forest changed. The whispering of the stream grew louder, and she thought for a moment they had reached the Monongahela. But it was only a slightly larger stream, swollen from the spring runoff. They still had the better part of a day's journey before they came close to the fort.

George spoke softly. "I think I hear something. When I tap your shoulder, stand still and be very quiet."

A shiver of fear shook her body, but she forced herself to continue until she felt his hand on her shoulder. Then she stopped and listened apprehensively.

Behind them a twig cracked and then all was silent. It wasn't an Indian. No Indian would be so careless. She listened nervously, but the sound didn't recur. At last, with a disquieting murmur, George signaled her to proceed. If there was someone following them, he was wise enough to keep at a distance.

Throughout the rest of the day, George stopped many times to listen, but they couldn't be sure they were being pursued. He made no attempt to speak to her, even though the miles dragged on in silence, and she found herself resenting his behavior. If he said one more word of apology, she was willing to forgive him. Just one word. But he said nothing. And the feeling of being pursued persisted. By the time they made camp for the night, Carolyn was nervous and deeply troubled.

In spite of her fear, George insisted on making a fire. "There's no reason to hide. Whoever is following

us—if in fact anyone is—knows where we are. We can't hide. And if it's an animal stalking us, as well it might be, we are safer with a fire than without one. No beast will brave it to attack us."

So he built a fire and roasted another rabbit. She ate hungrily. It had been a long day—and a tiring one.

"How close are we to the fort?"

He looked at her in surprise. She could see that he was embarrassed by her silence—and even more by her sudden communication. Did he regret what he had done? She felt a rush of anger. If so, why didn't he apologize?

"Not far." His voice was calm. "We should be there in a few hours if we keep up the pace. Do you want to go on now?"

She thought of the sounds that followed them. "No. Father says it's not safe to travel at night."

A strained smile lit his face. "I won't touch you again, if that's what's worrying you." For one moment their eyes met. "I honestly believed you wanted it."

Carolyn turned away. "You were wrong! What will I tell my father?" She bit her lip to hold back the sob that rose in her throat. "And William?"

George's jaw tightened. "Maybe he doesn't have to know. Many girls who ride horseback as you do don't bleed at all the first time—even though they're virgins." He flushed. In spite of his show of sophistication, he wasn't accustomed to such intimate talk with a woman, and he could see that it embarrassed her as well.

She nodded. This could not continue. It hurt too much. "Maybe you're right. I'll have to think on it. But"—she met his eyes and her body felt fluid under his glance—"it won't happen again. My clothes are dry now. I don't need to be kept warm."

He nodded. When the food was gone, he prepared two beds, one on either side of the fire. But he didn't bury the embers in mud, as he had the first night. With the possibility that a wild animal was stalking them,

they needed the flame for protection. And the wind that had been a problem before was still.

He settled her into her hollow and packed leaves over her. But he didn't immediately go to his side of the fire. "If you awake during the night, throw a log on the fire. I'll do the same. We'll be safer if we keep the fire alive."

She nodded and closed her eyes. But she was acutely aware that he remained standing over her, staring down at her face. She wished desperately that he would bend down and kiss her goodnight, and when she heard him move away, she felt far more disappointed than she was willing to admit.

The fire was low when she awoke, and she glanced across it to where George lay sleeping. Moving softly so as not to disturb him, she put a log over the embers. He stirred, but he didn't awaken, and she resumed her study of his face.

What power did he have over her to make her anger dissipate as soon as he spoke? Why did she find herself longing to touch him, when she knew what would most probably occur if she allowed herself to do so? He had attacked her, destroyed her honor, and yet in spite of it all, she could find no hate in her heart for him. Her eyes rested on his strong features, his straight nose with nostrils that flared slightly as he breathed, and she remembered the feel of his skin against hers, the roughness of the hairs on his chest against her swelling breasts. And the ecstasy—the indescribable ecstasy.

The wind stirred the fire and a blast of heat hit one side of her body. But she made no move to return to her bed. Settling on her knees, she let herself flow with the emotions that his nearness stirred within her. For one moment she admitted how wrong she had been to push him away. Maybe this was the emotion her mother spoke of when she talked of love between man and woman.

The wonder of it threatened to overcome her re-

serve. If this was what her mother had felt for her father—still felt, for their eyes, when they met, were filled with affection—then she would be wrong to deny her response. But could she be the one to admit her error? Could she face him and tell him she had been the one to . . .

Immediately she rejected the traitorous thought. Never! Not just because she loved William and planned to marry him when she reached New York. There was more to it than that. George had dropped his suit too quickly, almost as if he was relieved to find he had no responsibility to her.

She rose to her feet and moved into the woods. Before she returned to her bed, she would relieve herself. Lifting her skirts, she squatted behind a tree, out of sight of the fire. If he awoke . . . She wanted nothing to seduce him into a repeat of what had happened the night before.

She had reached the clearing when something—a hand—caught at her mouth and pulled her head back abruptly. Too startled to cry out, she kicked her assailant and flailed him with her arms, but her efforts made no impression on whoever it was who held her.

She felt herself lifted from her feet and clutched tightly in a pair of enormous arms. A bear? *Good God! Don't let it be a bear!* She caught a finger between her teeth and bit—hard.

"Sacre Dieu!" The words were muffled and hoarse, but at least she knew she was held by something human.

The hand was removed, and before she could cry out, a scarf was pulled between her teeth and tied far too tightly around her head. She gagged in discomfort, but instead of loosening her binding, her monstrous captor turned her and gazed into her face.

"Tres bien! La femme magnifique!"

Before she had a chance to collect her thoughts he bent down and lifted her over his shoulder, her bottom

high in the air and her legs clamped tightly in his arms. She forced herself erect and grabbed frantically at the branches that floated overhead. Her arms were too feeble, and most of the branches far too weak. She was clutching at a stronger branch when something hit her on the back of her head, throwing her down over her captor's back. Darkness closed in, and during those moments of unconsciousness her assailant gathered the reins of George's horse and hurried into the night.

When she regained consciousness, she was staring at the dirtiest pair of trousers she had ever seen. Her nostrils were filled with the stench of undisturbed filth. Bracing her arms against the thick back, she pushed her head up and inhaled some fresher air. Her awareness heightened. This, she knew, was not a nightmare!

The horse moved clumsily behind her, its heavy equine odor mixing with the smell of her captor. It was limping slightly, but the man who carried her and pulled the animal's reins paid no attention to its discomfort.

Suddenly she felt herself lifted down from the massive shoulder and dropped like a bundle to the ground. In the pale light of the half-moon, she could see that she faced a giant of a man with unkempt brown hair and a shaggy beard. His features were thick and ugly. On the end of his red nose a single coarse hair protruded. Black eyes peered out from under heavy brows. Buried deep in his beard, his lips were thick and wet, and on his left cheek was a dark, unsightly mole.

He removed his tricornered hat and bowed in mock gallantry. "Jean Lemelle, *mademoiselle,* at your service." His face was only inches from hers, and his breath was heavy with garlic and stale beer. She pulled away in disgust.

His hands caught her wrist. "Oh no, little lady. You ain't goin' nowhere!"

Pulling her hand free, she clutched at the scarf that filled her mouth, but her fingernails broke in the knot. He watched in amusement. "You listen to Jean, little girl. I'll untie you if you promise to keep quiet. If you yell, you'll have a knife in your ribs. You be good?"

She nodded.

When the gag fell away, she cupped her hands over her aching cheeks. "What do you want with me?"

"Want? Why, nothing at all! It's for you I'm doing this, though you might not believe it now. It's a downright shame for a pretty thing like you to spend your life like a savage. You deserve silks and precious jewels—and handsome men bowing over your hand. You deserve to be surrounded by wealth and beauty." He grinned slyly, his dark eyes prodding her body. "Now don't tell me you can resist such bait."

She lowered her eyes. How was it that he knew her innermost desires? She hadn't spoken of them to anyone—not even her mother. And certainly she had said nothing about them as she traveled with George. Maybe— She looked sharply into his dark face. Maybe this swarthy man had the power to read others' minds.

She knew what her father would say about such an idea. "Poppycock," that was what he called it. But she had never been able to ignore the occasional mystic who seemed to be able to look into the future—or read the minds of others. She hesitated, uncertain as to how she should take this strange foreigner.

Then abruptly her common sense returned. Why would she even consider the possibility that this disreputable creature could provide her with such rewards? She had heard about men like him, and if what she had been told was true, he offered only shame—and loneliness.

"Let me go!" She tried to twist her wrist free from his encircling hand. "I want to reach New York. I want to be with my fiancé! You don't know what I want!"

"New York?" Without releasing his hold, he leaned against a tree and began to laugh uproariously. "New York? You are one of the fortunate few who have the opportunity to go to New Orleans, and you speak of New York? Why, in New Orleans there is wealth such as you have never dreamed! And men galore! New York is a city of small-minded businessmen—and soldiers! Do you want to spend the rest of your life alone, waiting at home while your man chases redskins or fights for his place in the market? Be sensible, little lady, be sensible!"

She was too frightened to respond.

"You think your man, that wild-eyed rebel, will take you to New York? Not he. He'll marry you, that's true, and it will be the end of your happiness. You'll turn into a drudge, scrubbing noisy brats and dirty clothes. He'll probably make you help with the farm to boot. He's a country boy, little lady, believe me. I've seen many of his kind. They don't know how to treat a lady."

She had nothing to say. What would she gain by telling him she had no use for George Nelson? But maybe this massive man could help her, after all. "Please. Please take me to Fort Pitt. I belong there."

"Well, I don't, little missy. If I get within range of the guns, I'll be dropped in my tracks. We're taking the river, straight to the Mississippi." He turned and slapped the horse on the rump. "Get along, fellow. Reckon you've gone far enough."

Mulling plans for escape, Carolyn allowed Lemelle to push her through the underbrush. When he spoke she was startled.

"What's your name, little girl?"

"Carolyn Salford. My father is in charge of the fort—and he'll miss me and come after you."

A low, guttural laugh started her heart racing. "He will, will he? When he lets you wander around with

rebels and doesn't complain? You have a most unusual father, little girl, a most unusual father."

She flushed. He was right, of course. She stumbled on a protruding root and he caught her roughly.

"On your feet, little lady. We don't have much farther to go."

Suddenly she heard a rustling behind them, and her heart began to pound. George! He had awakened after all and was coming to save her! In the darkness, if he was careful, he could surprise Jean and easily overcome him.

Then the horse nickered and snorted.

Jean Lemelle cursed. "Get away! Go on! Away!" He drew his gun and aimed it at the horse's head.

Without thinking of the danger, Carolyn threw her body between the weapon and its intended victim. "Don't kill him! Please. He's just a dumb animal!" When she realized that the muzzle of the rifle had not lowered, she caught her breath.

"Hell, it don't matter. He ain't going to be able to do anything about it, even if he sees where we shove off." The gun was raised and Lemelle swung away. "Come on, the boat's up ahead."

So they were going down the river. They'd be passing the fort, maybe at daybreak. If she could catch the eye of the sentry, someone might come out to rescue her. She might even risk calling out. Lemelle would be paddling, so he'd have difficulty controlling her.

But if she didn't escape as they passed the fort—what then? Her father would be leaving for New York in three more days. When he found John Haglund's corpse, he would know something had happened to her. If he found John's corpse. But where would he search? He would think she had been captured by mountain men.

George had told her the attackers would steal all the wagons and the horses. If they buried the corpses

—or even if they just tossed them back out of sight, her father might pass without even realizing her plight. He wouldn't find out that she was in danger until he reached New York. And by then . . .

She had no doubts about what lay ahead for her. She had been warned often enough about men like Lemelle. He was a French trader. A dealer in furs—and women. Mostly women. He would take her to New Orleans, of that she had little doubt. But the silks and jewels he spoke of would be hers only if she pleased the men who would come to her each night. She had overheard her parents speak of the brothels of the city at the mouth of the Mississippi. And what they had said made her tremble with fear. Before they reached that destination—long before—she had to get away.

They reached the river, and his canoe lay hidden in the brush. When she saw it, her heart fell. She had waited too long to break away. Now her only hope lay in George. When he awoke he would see that she was gone—and he would be able to follow the path they had made through the underbrush. If he was observant he might see the heavy footsteps of a man behind hers.

If he was looking for them. But he might decide that she had gone ahead to the fort, taking the horse just to get even with him.

Lemelle nudged her with his knife and she stepped into the canoe. But as he went around to the rear, she leaned over the curved prow and threw her cap into the bushes. It might serve to warn George that she had not left of her own accord.

She felt the canoe bob in the water, and the cap was out of her sight. As Lemelle climbed into place, the horse nickered and began to move downstream.

Carolyn felt a rush of panic. If the horse left, George would be sure she had left on her own! He would ignore the warning cap—or maybe he would think she had dropped it accidentally.

Jean Lemelle grunted as he plied the paddle and

pushed the canoe into midstream. When it began to move smoothly, he leaned forward and tapped her on the shoulder. "Little girl, I found this on the bank. I wouldn't want your little head to get cold. You're worth far too much to me."

She twisted around and stared at his outstretched arm. In his hand he held her white cap, only slightly wet, stained with a spot of dirt where it had touched the ground.

Four

The sun was shining through the treetops when they reached the Ohio River. Carolyn had tried to call out once as they passed the fort, but Lemelle's musket had pressed hard against her back and she fell silent, watching her last hope of rescue fade in the distance.

When the fort was out of sight, Lemelle pointed the canoe toward shore. "Time for a rest, little lady." He leaped to the shore and pulled the canoe behind him. "Thought you'd want to"—he leered down at her—"relieve yourself."

She flushed. "Yes, I do." Turning, she headed into the woods.

She was jerked back by the hair. "Just where do you think you're going, little girl? Thinking to get lost in the woods? You'll tend to your business here, where I can keep an eye on you."

Seeking what privacy she could by spreading her skirt and leaning against a tree, she attended to her needs. Then, her eyes lowered, she returned to the canoe.

He caught her as she passed and pulled her into his arms. The sour smell of his breath made her choke, and his tongue pressed against her lips, pushing her mouth open to receive it.

She gasped and then suddenly bit down.

"Sacre Dieu!" His snarl was accompanied by a blow that sent her reeling. "Lucky you didn't draw blood,

or I'd kill you!" Grabbing her by the shoulder, he threw her into the canoe. "I'll tame you later! They pay well for a girl with spirit!"

He reconsidered before he pushed off from shore. Pulling a rope from the bottom of the canoe, he tied her wrists to her ankles. When she was soundly trussed, he resumed the journey.

The ropes cut into her skin. "Beast! I hope the Indians catch us and kill you!" She spat out the words.

"Then they'll kill you, too—or worse. Don't know why you're fightin', little girl. You got the body it takes to make men mad. What's so wrong in usin' it?"

"Untie me!"

Lemelle grinned wickedly. "Not yet, little lady. Ain't often I get a morsel I can taste. I get too good a price for virgin meat. But you ain't that kind, are you? Lucky I saw you washin' off your legs, or I mightn't a known. Was it the rebel took you? Maybe I shoulda killed him. Cost me money, he did." He paddled a while in silence. "But then, it ain't all a loss. This way, I gets ta have ya, too."

Carolyn pushed herself up and looked into his face. "You watched us?" The thought of his eyes on her as she lay in George's arms disgusted her.

"Hell, no! Wish I coulda. Saw you wash the blood off in the stream. Lucky thing. I'd just about given up. There ain't no pretty women in Fort Pitt—'ceptin' the colonel's wife. She just ain't never alone."

Her mother? Carolyn shuddered. "You were in the fort?"

"Ain't no problem for a trader." He stared at her in silence. If he knew they were not being followed, he would pull ashore now and take her. He was too cautious a man to risk losing so valuable a prize. But he could enjoy her more if . . . He aimed again for the shore.

When he pushed back into the water, Carolyn lay on her back, her face wet with tears and her gown

torn open to the waist. The sun beat down on her bare skin, but the flush that covered her face was from embarrassment—and shame. There was no way she could escape his burning eyes, and her realization that he was watching her stirred her outrage. There was nothing she could do to get away until they reached the shore again. But she had to work out a plan. Deliberately she turned her face towards the woods.

Her primary task was to convince him that she could be trusted so he would remove her ropes. Distasteful as it might be, she would have to endure his touch—maybe even pretend to enjoy it. Then . . . Then she would run to . . . Her mind grew hazy as the steady rhythm of the water lulled her into unconsciousness. She was slipping—slipping. And then, no longer able to keep her eyes open, she fell into a troubled sleep.

Lemelle guided the canoe through a section of white water and then, safely through, returned his gaze to Carolyn's exposed breasts. They were, he decided, the best tits he had seen in many a year! And her waist was narrow! Eager as he was to claim her when the day's journey ended, he still felt a small regret that she was not a virgin. One as good-looking as she would command a high price were she untouched.

Somewhere in his dealings with female slaves he had heard of a trick some whores used to deceive customers who wanted virgins. He would have to think on that further. If he fixed the girl up with such a contraption before he sold her, he could insist she was chaste. And who would ever know? The brothel owner would never try out his own goods until after he had sold her to some high-paying customer.

Carolyn stirred in her sleep, her breasts heaving in memory of passion still near to her. Lemelle stoically resumed his paddling. He looked up at the sky. Soon. The sun was already lower. He'd have her soon.

When they touched shore again, Carolyn was fully

awake—and aware of her need to break free. As the canoe touched the bank, he released her ropes and pulled her into the water. But she did not protest his mistreatment. Suppressing her distaste for his vulgarity, she forced herself to look into his face. "Please, Mister Lemelle, don't tie me up again. I promise I won't try to get away."

He snorted, a drop of moisture dripping from his nose down onto his ragged beard.

"If you want to"—she blushed at her daring—"look at my body, I'll not try to cover myself." She winced when his eyes lit up, but she held her ground.

He studied her bare breasts appreciatively and then took one breast in each hand, squeezing them roughly. "If I want, I can take off your skirt, too. You ain't doin' me no favors that way."

She shuddered. What more was there for her to offer?

Suddenly he pulled her toward the canoe. "All right. But I don't let you loose from this." He tugged on her wrist. "And you'll do as I tell you, or I'll truss you up again."

There were many times in the hours that followed when Carolyn regretted her offer to cooperate. Jean Lemelle took her at her word, demanding that she sit facing him with her gown open, her breasts exposed to the bright sunlight. Her feeling of shame overwhelmed her. Why had she been so foolish as to think she could effect her freedom?

In spite of her despair, she resisted the temptation to drown herself—or to risk a bullet in her back as she leaped overboard. She could tell when she looked at his face that he was at last beginning to trust her.

The sun was resting on the horizon when Lemelle sought the shore. He held the canoe steady as she disembarked, and though he held onto the rope that secured her wrist, he made no attempt to secure her

further. Lifting a jug from the bottom of the canoe, he set her about the task of gathering wood for a fire.

To her surprise he made no attempt to hunt. When the flames were licking up the bark of the largest log, he pulled out a handful of dried beef strips and pushed a few in her direction.

She chewed on them in silence until at last her mouth was too dry for her to continue. "Please, Mister Lemelle. I'm thirsty."

Instead of dipping water from the river, he shoved the jug into her hands, laughing loudly when she had difficulty lifting it to her mouth.

She sputtered in surprise when the burning fluid touched her lips. But it was too late. She had swallowed automatically, and she could feel the warmth spreading through her body. Her father had not permitted her to imbibe the corn whisky that was so popular among the soldiers, though she had tasted a fine brandy her mother had purchased in New York. This drink assaulted her senses, and in the end did her a service. For once the first shock was past, she drank more, and the glow with which it dulled her senses softened the impact of what lay ahead.

He had said he would take her. The memory of his words filled her with revulsion. Yet, distasteful as his threat was, she felt a new curiosity. George had been so beautiful—so gentle. What was it this ugly man planned to do?

He ate noisily, smacking his lips as he chewed and washing each bite down with a mouthful of corn whisky. Then, wiping his mouth with the front of his hand, he tugged on the rope that held her a prisoner. The hair on the end of his nose twitched.

She began to tremble. It was coming now. The small ghost of excitement that had accompanied her contemplation of what lay ahead vanished, leaving only a swelling terror.

He jerked her to her feet and pulled her across the

small clearing to a tree that stood just out of sight of the river. Grabbing her loose hand, he threw the rope around the tree and secured her other wrist. She was helpless—and totally at his mercy.

Suddenly the rope was pulled down and she was bent over, her head between her arms. She felt him grab her skirt and pull it up over her back, and she knew her backside was exposed to his lecherous view.

Her body tensed in anticipation of a blow. She had heard of men who pleasured themselves by beating women. Was he one such? She shuddered, but somehow the thought was comforting. A beating she could endure.

Without warning he thrust himself upon her, pushing through her tender flesh with a force that brought a cry of pain to her lips. At first she could not believe what had happened. But when he began to move within her, she knew—and screamed in agony.

With no more thought of her sensibilities than he would have had for an animal, he hammered himself into her body, grunting and muttering as he moved. Then suddenly he pushed against her with a shout, almost knocking her head on the tree.

When she recovered from the abruptness of his action, he had moved from her, and she realized from the moisture flowing down her legs that she had served as a container for his lust. She had been used—used as she would be many times over if he succeeded in his plan. What George had made into a beautiful experience, Lemelle had perverted into pain—and disgrace.

Blushing with a mixture of shame and anger, she worked her arms down the tree until she was able to sit on the ground. Then she twisted under the rope and turned her back to the trunk. There was no greater comfort possible for her, but at least he was through with her for a while, and his drinking was occupying his entire attention.

Closing her eyes, she thought back on conversations she had had with her mother. Both her parents had been reluctant to allow her to go ahead—but she had stubbornly insisted. Now she knew she had been wrong to take such a risk. Had she done as they wanted, she would be leaving the fort between them, safe—and happily anticipating her engagement and marriage to William.

"Oh, mama! Why didn't I wait? Why did I have to hurry ahead?" She was weeping, but she felt no shame in her tears. She had wanted luxuries, valuing them above all the pleasures her parents had provided her. But she realized for the first time that everything in life had a price. When she was a— She couldn't say the word, but she knew it all too well. When she was one of *them,* she would have luxuries, at least so Lemelle insisted. But the cost would be too high.

Her thoughts returned to her father. He had told her of the importance of honor—and self-respect. He had told her often. But until this moment, she had never truly listened.

An evening breeze ruffled her skirt. She thought for a moment that she would call Lemelle and ask for a blanket, but she held her peace. The cold was preferable to another assault. Leaning her head back against the tree, she struggled to wipe the memory of her shame from her mind.

She felt a shock of terror when he rose and staggered from the fire, but he did not come directly to her side. First he pulled a pair of blankets from the canoe. Tossing one over her bare legs, he pulled the other around his shoulders and then, with a bleary glance at her breasts, he returned to his place beside the fire. The jug was once more tilted up, and a trickle ran down his arm.

The woods were dark, the evening calls of the birds stilled. The only sound Carolyn could hear was the crackling of the flames as they ate at the logs. Remem-

bering George's care, she prayed that there would be no wind to spread the fire. Tied as she was, she would not survive such a conflagration.

A grunt drew her eyes back to her captor. He lay sprawled beside the campfire, his head resting on a log. The jug lay beside him, and a trickle of liquid was spilling into the dirt.

"Mister Lemelle!" Her voice was strident.

He barely opened his eyes. "Shut up, whore! If you want more, you gotta wait 'till I'm ready."

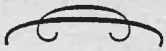
She shuddered. Had she condemned herself to another attack? When he did not rise, she searched the ground with her eyes. He had placed the gun within his reach, but not directly at his side. If he did that every night . . .

And if he could be persuaded not to bind her. She shifted her weight and a pain shot through her backside. Hateful as it might be, she would have to convince him to forgo the shackles. If she were free, could she endure another attack without fighting back?

He stirred and brought the jug once more to his lips, spilling a dark puddle on his shirt.

Tomorrow she would try to escape. She would do whatever she had to, to succeed. And if she failed? Death would be better than spending the rest of her life in a brothel—at the mercy of men like Lemelle.

Five



She awakened slowly, unwilling to leave the gentle comfort of the night. Her backside was sore—sorer than it had ever been, even when she first had learned to ride a horse. Then with a rush the memory of her torment returned. She shifted uneasily. Her arms tingled and her fingers were numb from a night of inactivity.

Mustering her courage, she lifted her head. "Mister Lemelle!" She tried to keep her voice soft and gentle, but she could see him start at her words. "Please! I wish to ask you something!"

He glared at her balefully. "Can't you see when a man needs sleep? Ain't you got no sense, little missy?"

She shuddered. He could be readying himself for another attack. He could be—but something in the way he sprawled told her it would not be right away.

"If you release me, I'll fix your food."

She waited for some response, but when none came she continued. "Please. I promise I won't run away. I—" It was not easy to go on, but she had to gain his confidence. "I didn't know you could do such n—nice things to me!" The lie stuck in her throat, but she forced it out, smiling fixedly into his dull eyes.

He stirred himself and staggered to his feet, his hands clutching at his head. Then he fumbled with his breeches. Without bothering to turn from the fire, he relieved himself over the coals, chuckling heavily as the glowing embers sputtered under the stream of water.

Carolyn flushed and averted her gaze. When he shuffled toward her, she steeled herself for another assault. But he went directly to the tree and tugged at the rope. As it fell from her wrists, she gasped in pain and rubbed her hands together. Slowly the tingling increased and then abruptly it was over. She flexed her fingers in delight. Now, if only she could convince him to leave her arms unbound.

"Food's in the canoe!" He shoved her toward the bank and she fell to the ground, catching herself with her outstretched arms. Sharp pains ran up to her shoulders and she gasped. Then, aware that he was moving toward her, she crawled to the canoe and dug into the mess that cluttered its hull.

There was little in the form of supplies from which she could prepare a meal, but she did what she could with what he had. There was more beef, some hard bread, and a bag of tea leaves. On the bottom of the pile she found an old pot, which she washed and filled with water. Her thoughts went back to the delicious breakfasts her mother prepared, and she longed once more that her ordeal were over. Then, convinced that she had only herself to turn to for help, she returned to the task at hand.

When the small amount of food was prepared and consumed, she helped Lemelle repack the canoe. But before she took her place in the bow, she mentioned her desire to fish as they continued down the river.

He showed obvious pleasure at her offer. Digging through a bundle of rags, he unearthed a ball of twine and a small metal hook, which he tied securely to the string. "You'd better sit more for'rd, if you wants to fish. Don't need no hook catchin' my paddle."

She didn't dispute his decision, but shifted some of the bundles and settled herself far to the front of the canoe. It wasn't until they began moving that she realized she had avoided the indignity of her earlier journey. Evidently Jean Lemelle valued a good meal

more than a second view of a woman whose body he had already enjoyed.

The journey this time was far less frightening. By noontime Carolyn had caught four good-sized fish and when they stopped to eat, she cooked them as she had seen George do it, spearing them on long sticks and resting the ends of the sticks on large rocks.

Just the knowledge that she had a plan raised her spirits. But she refused to think about the possibility that she might have to submit to him once more before she made her escape. Instead she let her mind wander free, dwelling on the beauty that surrounded her and the certainty that soon she would be on her way home.

The day was truly glorious. The spray from the canoe sparkled in the afternoon sun, and the comfort of a full stomach increased her confidence. She had felt weak from hunger as well as from the outrage of his attack, and she had been aware that she could not run far in such a condition. But with the hook and string, she had some hope. She would, she decided, be sure to take it with when she made her escape.

The river turned, and on the far bank she saw a doe lift its head and watch as they floated by. A yearling grazed beside it, and far behind a buck stood guard. Carolyn felt a momentary sadness. Would she ever feel that sort of love? Would William still want her when he learned what she had been through?

There was a splash in the water and she pulled in the line. She had gone fishing often with her father, back at the fort, and she knew how to keep her catch fresh. Running the end of the line that had no hook through the fish's lower jaw, she let the fat trout join the others she had already captured and then dropped them all back into the water.

It would have pleased her to avoid all conversation with Lemelle, but he seemed inspired by her new cooperation. Now that he felt certain of her willingness to

travel with him, he waxed eloquent in his description of the pleasures that lay ahead for her.

"You ain't never seen nothin' like the houses down there in New Orleans! Grand, like you can't imagine." He seemed eager to arouse her enthusiasm. "Why, if you behave yourself like you're doin' now, I'll talk to my friends and get you into the best house in town."

She nodded absentmindedly. Half the day was over. Soon she would have the opportunity to test her plan.

"Di'ja hear me?" She nodded vigorously. "Ya like that? I can, you know. I know 'em all. Every one. And I got influence. I ain't never brought a girl down that wasn't worth her price." He was silent for a time, and she wondered if at last he had run out of things to say.

But she had not judged him correctly. He seemed pensive as he continued. "Hell, I ain't never let on a girl was fresh if she wasn't, and I ain't tried none of the tricks some hunters use. I got a good reputation to uphold. Ain't another hunter as good as me."

Again Carolyn nodded. So there was some form of honor even in this despicable trade! She caught another fish. That made five—and the sun was still well above the horizon. She considered for a moment urging him to put ashore early, and then rejected the idea. She would only run the risk of more abuse.

The fish joined the others and she let the line back in the water. Unpleasant as it might be to increase the distance she would have to travel, she had no desire to hurry the moment when she would again be confronted by Lemelle's lust.

Then she caught another fish and her spirits lifted. Maybe, she mused, she could stuff him with food and drink—and avoid his attack altogether.

Silently she began to enumerate the items she would take when she made her escape. His gun. Not only because she could use it, but in order to keep him from shooting her as she left. His canoe, if only to keep him

from pursuing her. And the fishhook and twine, so she would be able to feed herself on the journey home. She chose to ignore the possibility that with his supplies gone, Lemelle might perish, but when the thought flitted through her mind, she felt no regret.

The thought of home warmed her heart. She could see it clearly in her mind's eye, a grayish-brown fort made of the tallest, thickest trees the men could find. All around the top of the wall the trees had been sharpened to points, and inside, a ledge had been built to allow the defenders to peer over the top and fire their weapons if they were attacked. Within were small quarters to house the entire settlement, but they were seldom used—only when the Indians were aroused. Most of the time the settlers remained in their own homes, small log houses sprinkled over the surrounding countryside in the middle of well-groomed farms.

She had always felt a glow of pleasure when she rode out from the fort and saw the busy farmers, but she had assumed her satisfaction was in the weather—or in the joy of riding. Now she knew. They were brave people—good people. They did harm to no one, and they endured the risk of Indian attack and the isolation brought on by the winter snows. They labored long, hard hours to farm their land.

While she had lived among them, she had belittled their efforts, but now, far from the protection of the fort, she realized that there was excitement and adventure in starting a new life in the wilderness. And she wondered, for the first time in her eighteen years, if she might not be better suited for such a life than for the comforts that would surround her after she married William Jaeger.

Idly she visualized her soldier fiancé and the elite life he led. But when she found she had difficulty remembering his face, she began a point-by-point comparison between him and George Nelson. William was taller than George, and his body was more refined—

and, she reluctantly acknowledged, delicate. George's eyes were brown—and filled with laughter. William's were blue, like her own. And were they sometimes cold?

She forced her mind to leave such a thought. George was the cruel one. He had taken her—against her will. He had forced himself on her. And William was a gentleman. He would never behave in such an outrageous manner.

With that thought she brushed her memories of George to the back of her mind—and along with them her fleeting thought that she might, after all, belong in the wilderness. She was going to escape from Lemelle, and she was going to reach New York.

She looked down at her torn bodice. Once she was free she would pin it up with the fishhook. And when she reached the fort, she would change into new clothes before continuing her journey.

She wondered if she would have to wait until another contingent of men made the trip. That, she knew, could result in a long delay, during which her parents would mourn her as if she were dead. Did she dare face the Appalachians alone? The mountain men were there, and next time they might capture her! Then she realized that to reach the fort she would have to traverse great distances—alone. If she survived that journey, the trip across the mountain would not be impossible!

Impatiently she pushed the entire question aside. One problem at a time. First she had to make her escape.

Lemelle yawned and turned the canoe toward shore. He had been counting the fish Carolyn had caught, and his mouth was watering in anticipation of the banquet. This girl was turning out to be more of a treasure than he had expected. He thought for a moment of the possibility of keeping her for himself, but he pushed the idea from his mind before he could dwell too long on

it. He was too fond of money to forgo the price he could get for one as willing as this. And besides, he had a taste for new partners.

Not that this one was boring him yet. It was in fact doubtful that she would, no matter how long the trip. She certainly was full of surprises. Of all the women who had traveled the river with him, she was the first to come around so soon and to show her cooperation by helping prepare the food.

He held the canoe still against the bank as Carolyn stepped ashore and pulled the catch from the water. Without a glance at him for guidance, she laid the fish on the rock and began to gather firewood. This time, spurred by his eagerness to taste her delights once more, he assisted her, and when she explained her need for forked sticks on which to rest the fish as it cooked, he found and cut the desired branches. Then he pulled out his flint and set the kindling ablaze.

The savory odor of fresh-roasted fish caused him a momentary distraction. He had intended to take the girl once before eating. Somewhat disgruntled, he settled himself against a tree and brought his jug to his lips. His supply was running low, but he was incapable of limiting his immediate pleasure to avoid future deprivation.

His eyes fastened on her open bodice, he let the sharp whisky flow down his throat. When she got the fish properly cooking, he'd take her. Then, if he felt up to it, he'd be able to manage a second dip before he went to sleep. The thought made him smile. It was pleasant to have an amenable woman for a change.

Carolyn turned the fish slowly, watching the fat spit as it fell into the fire. The fragrance brought saliva to her mouth. If George . . . No, if William were with her, this would be a pleasant camp. She cast a glance toward Lemelle, and her pleasure vanished. He had placed the jug on the ground, and he was striding toward her, fumbling with the tie on his loose breeches.

She felt an urge to scream and run, and her eyes darted about the campsite. Where had he left his gun? When she saw it, she knew she had to wait. It lay on the far side of the fire, just behind him. He would kill her before she reached the woods.

He made no sound until he was upon her. Staggering clumsily, he pulled her from the fire and threw her to the ground.

She fell on her back and lay gasping for breath. He was upon her before she recovered. Thick hands clawed at her buttocks and lifted her up to meet him. And then, with a lunge, he was between her thighs, tearing at her soft flesh.

His movements quickened, and a guttural laugh spilled from his lips. He was enjoying her discomfort! Startled, she stifled her cries and stared into he woods. No one would come to her rescue, no matter how loud she called.

The pounding continued, each thrust bringing a sharp agony that ripped her belly. He was grunting like a pig, a line of spittle dripping from his mouth onto her naked stomach. Carolyn closed her eyes and muttered a prayer. It would end. It had to end! But it hurt too much for her to watch him, too.

Suddenly he roared and pulled her against his hips. She felt him tear into her, felt the coarse hairs press against her delicate lips, knew he was spilling his slime inside her, and she gagged.

Abruptly he drew back. Turning, he wiped himself on her skirt and picked up his jug.

She washed herself thoroughly before returning to the fire, and one of the fish was burned. But he seemed not to notice. One by one he put away the fish as she cooked, leaving only one of the six for her. This she ate delicately—deliberately dragging out the time before she would again face his lust. Every time she glanced at him her confidence grew. Each mouthful of whisky was followed by the movement of his hand

across his mouth and then down the length of his trousers, and each time there was less control in the way he performed the act.

When he tilted the jug to empty the last drops, she felt a momentary despair. He rose and staggered toward her, his dark, bulging eyes fastened on her breasts. But he passed her without stopping, pulled another jug from the canoe, and opened it before he returned to his place under the tree. As he reached her side he paused. "Hurry that up, missy. I ain't finished with you yet!"

She looked up, praying that her face showed none of her revulsion. "I'm hurrying, Mister Lemelle. There's so many bones in this one."

He reached down and patted her breast, pinching the nipple between his thumb and forefinger. "You're quite a woman, little missy. Quite a woman. Don't take too long, you hear?"

She nodded and returned to her food. When he resumed his drinking, she breathed a sigh of relief. Audibly protesting each time she encountered another bone, she picked her way through the fish. It tasted delicious, and she had difficulty pretending such disinterest, but she was playing for time. He did not, as yet, show readiness to attack her, and if she could delay him until he was drunk, she might escape him altogether.

When she could no longer prolong her eating, she rose and headed for the river. She had washed quickly before, and now she planned a much more extensive display. Lifting her skirts, she began to repeat the scrubbing of her legs, and she heard him grunt in satisfaction. Frightened, she glanced at his face. He had not moved. He lay sprawled on the ground, his bottle beside him, his eyes fastened on her body.

She bent down slowly and observed his response. The flow of saliva that ran down his beard increased, but he made no move to rise. One hand lay on his flaccid organ.

Languorously moving her hand up her leg, she let it rest at last on the delicate curls that crowned her femininity. His hand began to move, but he showed no tendency to approach her. She felt a new security. Clearly she had judged him right. He enjoyed a long period of watching—maybe even more than actual contact with a woman.

He took another draught from his jug, and she waited until he was finished before she continued. When she felt his eyes again on her body, she began to rotate her hips seductively. His hand was moving quickly now, and the sight filled Carolyn with a swelling nausea. Closing her eyes against the ugliness of his act, she continued to move seductively as she scrubbed the memory of his touch from her thighs.

She looked up in alarm when she heard his jug fall to the ground. Had she judged him wrong? Was he coming now to attack her again, as he had threatened?

He lay against the tree, his eyes fixed on her legs, his body twitching convulsively. The jug had fallen to the ground beside him, a trickle of liquid spilling out over his legs. As she watched, the movement stopped and he lay still, his eyes glazed with alcohol and satisfied lust.

She stilled the rolling of her hips and he grunted noisily. Immediately she started again. Would he never succumb to the alcohol? Her actions were beginning to bring a warmth to her abdomen, and she wanted no distractions. Not now. Her mind seemed disconnected from her body, as if she were unwilling to accept her brazenness. This could not be Carolyn Salford! She would never act in such a vulgar manner!

Impatiently she ignored her rising modesty and forced herself to look again at Lemelle. Later, when she was safe, she could give in to her shame. Later. Now all that mattered was that she succeed in her bold design.

The next time she stopped her rotating, he did not

protest. She began to walk toward him, her eyes on his flushed countenance. He grunted, and she paused. Then suddenly he lifted himself up. Startled, she retreated. But long before she stopped, he had fallen back to the ground, his arms too uncoordinated to hold him.

"Later, little missy—later. Don't worry, I'll get to ya t'nite. Shleep now. Juss a little while."

Carolyn's eyes darted about the camp. His rifle? She saw it then, inches from his hand. It took her a moment to think of a plan to free it, and then she moved swiftly. She took a blanket from the canoe and spread it over his body, and when he grunted in satisfaction, she raised his hand and let it rest over the cover. Then when he was quiet once more, she lifted the rifle into her arms.

She moved swiftly, aware that in spite of his drunkenness, he still could awaken and pursue her. The gun she placed in the bow of the canoe. Then she pushed the vessel away from the shore and climbed into the back, picking up the paddle Lemelle had dropped carelessly on the gravel that lined the shore.

She felt the current catch her and pull her into midstream. And then she was moving swiftly downriver. She was free—and Lemelle had not noticed her leaving.

Her elation was short-lived. The current picked up the canoe and pushed it downstream, turning it slowly in circles. She began to paddle wildly, dripping water in her lap as she moved the blade from one side of the boat to the other. Then abruptly she was past the central current.

Her arms were weak by the time she succeeded in turning the canoe upstream, but she dared not stop her efforts. Holding as close to shore as the water would allow, she forced her vessel to move against the current. More than once she paused to rest, pushing the nose against the shore, but she dared not stop until she was past Lemelle's campsite. When she reached a

curve in the river, her passage grew easier. It was here that the force of the current, pushing against the other bank, had pulled her downstream.

The next time she rested, she gazed across the wide expanse of water and saw Lemelle's fire flickering in the darkness. He had not awakened. As soon as she felt refreshed, she renewed her journey.

The fire glowed faintly in the distance when she began to search for a refuge. Ahead, past a line of rocks, the shore was smooth and sandy. There she could beach her vessel and hide it so Lemelle, on the other bank, would not see it. Bending low, she increased her efforts.

Suddenly the nose of the canoe was lifted up, and then with a splash it dropped into the darkness. Water gushed into the tear that she had glimpsed momentarily—gushed in and pulled the canoe to the bottom.

With a cry of alarm, Carolyn dropped her paddle and lunged toward a low-hanging branch. When her fingers closed over the rough bark, she pulled herself toward the shore. The canoe followed sluggishly.

As soon as she reached shallow water, she clambered out and pulled the bow of the canoe up out of the water. It was damaged beyond repair. Frantically she began to unload the supplies onto the shore: the gun, the rope, the remaining blanket, a leather pouch that held ammunition and powder, a knife blade that had been discarded in the hull, and a small pouch containing jerky. Then she pushed the canoe back into the river, wading out until it was caught by the current and torn from her grasp.

It began to spin as it hit midstream and then suddenly it was lost in the darkness, spilling debris on the current. She watched until everything was out of sight.

Back on the shore once more, she threw her supplies into the blanket and slung it over her shoulder.

She would have to rest somewhere nearby. If she was lucky, Lemelle would conclude that she had gone down with the canoe. If not . . .

She would rise early and continue her flight. She would not be safe until she reached the fort.

Six

A twig crackled behind her. Startled, Carolyn jerked to attention. Had Lemelle followed her after all—while she slept the time away in a tree? For a moment she was overcome with regret. Why had she wasted time cleaning up and fishing?

As her eyes searched the shore behind her, she reviewed her actions since awakening. She had been confused at first, and had stumbled around until her thoughts were collected and she was ready to begin the day. Then she had hurried on until she came to where large boulders pushed out into the river.

They were readymade for her use. Some were low and flat, large enough for her to sit on comfortably. Others were tall and massive, serving to conceal her from anyone—from Lemelle, were he to search for her from the opposite shore.

First she attended to her personal chores. Then she settled down to wash the dirt—and the memory of Lemelle—from her body.

The chilly water of the Ohio teased her skin and left her feeling renewed and fresh. She had forgotten the need for silence as she bathed, and she had been worried, for a time, that she might have called Lemelle's attention to her. But no one had appeared on the muddy bank opposite her resting place. Relieved, she had left her clothes in a neat pile and settled down to fish without bothering to dress.

Now, suddenly, she wondered at the wisdom of her

actions. Her dress lay on another boulder. And the crackling sound was closer.

Had Lemelle followed her, after all? Had he forded the Ohio, and was he right now preparing to pounce upon her?

She rose from her squatting position and crept to the rock on which she had left her clothes. Her warm, dry body slid smoothly into the folds of cloth and reassured by her minimal protection, she searched the shifting shadows that filled the forest.

A movement to her left caught her attention. Alert, ready to flee if escape was called for, she moved toward her musket. And then a pair of frolicking bear cubs emerged from the woods. Tumbling and squealing, they careened toward the river bank.

Carolyn watched them warily. Delightful as the two furry playmates might be, they could bring total destruction in their wake. For somewhere in the woods, as yet unseen, was their mother. And she would become a raging fury if she thought even for a moment that her babies were in danger.

The first cub stopped suddenly, his nose in the air. He sniffed curiously and then began to run straight toward the rock on which Carolyn hid.

She looked about in alarm. What had attracted him? Her nose gave her the answer. She had been so hungry when the first fish pulled on her line! She had torn it from the hook and then, aware that she had no fire, had eaten it as her father had taught her—raw. As she chewed the tasty bites, she had smiled at the memory of her mother's outrage when first she had had such a delicacy presented to her.

Carolyn had been fishing in the Monongahela, and had proudly carried home her catch—six good-sized trout. But her father had refused to allow her mother to cook them. Slicing them into bits, he had offered them to Carolyn and to her very surprised mother.

As usual Carolyn had eaten hers without protest,

having learned to trust her father's advice and understanding that he was showing her the importance of raw foods if fire was not available. Her mother, on the contrary, had looked at the raw fish in absolute horror. "Robert! Raw? You expect us to eat it raw?"

"But of course, my dear. It's not only good, but very satisfying." His eyes had sparkled mischievously. "How did you think we would have eaten fish had you caught any on our journey together from Oswego to New York?"

Carolyn laughed in memory of her mother's shocked response. "No! And to think I was sorry when I failed!"

But in the end her mother had eaten the raw fish, too, and she had been surprised at its delicious flavor. Carolyn, aware of the disagreement that existed between her parents regarding the importance of knowledge of the wilderness, had filed the information away without further comment.

Now, watching the cub advance toward her rocky shelter, she wished passionately that she had remembered a few other words of parental advice. She had eaten that first fish ravenously, forgetting to hold her head over the water and to dispose of every scrap of waste in the stream. A few bits of skin had adhered to the rock, and now, in the warming sunshine, they gave off a strong odor. It was that which had drawn the cub's attention.

There were, fortunately, other rocks to which she could retreat. But she would have to sacrifice her catch if she didn't want to be followed.

The cub reached the water and hesitated, his head weaving from side to side. He would have to leap over a narrow space between the land and the rocks, and his delay gave Carolyn the time she needed. She pulled the string with her three fish out of the water and slipped them free, placing them next to each other on a flat rock close to the drying skin. Then, quickly

gathering her blanket, rope, twine, and musket, she moved downwind from the exploring bear cub.

Just as she reached safety, the furry baby bounced up to the three fish. He picked one up in his jaws and settled down to eat it, growling noisily. The second cub arrived, nuzzled the second fish, and began to lick at the skin that had caused the original danger. Then, roaring in infant fury, it took a fish and tore at it with its teeth, holding it firmly under one paw.

Carolyn moved behind the safety of a large rock and waited. She dared not leave until she knew where the mother was, for her father had warned her of the danger presented when a female bear was separated from its young. The ledge on which she had taken shelter was narrow, and her legs ached from the strain of balancing. Yet even in her discomfort she could not ignore the charm of the two cubs.

When they finished their fish they both lunged at the last one and began to wrestle, pushing each other away from the tempting morsel. In spite of her danger, Carolyn couldn't repress a giggle of delight. Each cub held one end of the fish in his jaws, and they were pulling wildly, tumbling over each other in their eagerness to win the prize. By some miracle of balance they avoided falling into the water, but more than once one of them hung over the edge of the rock, his only hold on safety being his grasp around the other's body.

Then suddenly they rolled head-over-heels, like a great furry ball—right into the river. Their mouths fell open in cries of simultaneous distress and the fish fell away, completely forgotten.

A thunderous roar accompanied the appearance of a large, angry female. She covered the distance from the woods to the rocks in great strides, bawling loudly all the way. By the time she reached the rock from which the cubs had vanished, they were scrambling

back to safety, their fur dripping. And from the volume of their complaints, it was clear they both felt they had been grossly misused.

They shook themselves wildly, spraying water as far as Carolyn's new place of concealment, and began to climb over their mother as if they thought she had stolen their missing delicacy. Then, when it became clear that the fish was gone, they began to fight over the small scrap of skin that still adhered to the rock.

Carolyn watched in worried silence. If the three bears returned to the woods, she could do as she pleased—either resume her fishing or continue her journey. If they stayed to play in the water or to fish, she might be confined to her hiding place for much of the morning. And she knew that the longer she stayed where she was, the greater the possibility that Jean Lemelle might see her and take pursuit.

She breathed a sigh of relief when the mother bear herded her young to the shore and chased them into the woods. And she grinned in amusement when one cub turned for a final look at the river, shook himself again, and bawled piteously before vanishing into the brush.

A new peace surrounded the river's edge. Reasonably sure that the bear and her cubs would not return, Carolyn looked down at her skirt. It had caught on a branch the night before, and a large rip ran down the entire length. Clearly she could not expect to make any time if she didn't do something about her apparel.

She studied the tear in silence. What would her father tell her to do? There was one thing of which she was certain. Neither her mother nor her father would be overly concerned with propriety. Safety was all that mattered. Safety—and warmth.

She removed both her dress and her petticoat. The sun had risen above the trees, and its rays felt warm on her naked body. She stood for a moment, reveling

in the joy of her freedom. Then she settled down to her task.

First she tore a series of one-inch-wide strips from the bottom of her slip, leaving a length that would reach from her shoulders to well below her waist. This she tore again, making four deep slashes up from the bottom, forming a loose blouse open under the arms and down the sides of the body.

The embroidery around the waist provided holes through which she ran one of the strips, and this she tightened to form the neck of her new shirt. She pulled the makeshift garment over her head and then, using the other strips, tied the bodice and the sleeves, overlapping the cloth to conceal the lack of stitching.

She used the same technique to turn her skirt into trousers. The extra cloth she wound around her legs, forming a thick padding that she knew would shield her shins from further bruising. Protected in this manner, she would find passage through the woods considerably easier. And perhaps even more important, she would not so easily be identified as a woman.

To further guarantee her anonymity, she worked her hair into a long braid that fell down her back. Then, ready to move if the occasion demanded, she resumed her fishing.

During these alterations, she had paid little attention to her surroundings, except to keep her ears tuned to any new sound. Then suddenly she became aware that she was under observation. How long had she been watched? And by whom?

When she looked up, she saw Jean Lemelle standing immobile on the opposite bank. He was staring at her fixedly, and she knew immediately that he had been there for far too long a time. His face was distorted with the strength of his lust, and his stance was one of tense readiness.

When he caught her movement, he lifted his head.

"Little lady!" His voice was faint, blown back by the wind, but his meaning was clear. "You run away from Jean Lemelle—you be sorry!"

She shuddered. Why had she lingered so long? She began to gather her supplies, hardly daring to look in his direction. Then suddenly she forced herself to stop. Her father had warned her never to act in fear. She had to collect herself.

At least at present Lemelle was no danger. He could shout and curse at her, but until he could find a way to cross the river, that was the extent of the harm he could do.

The problem was that now he knew where she was —and which direction she was heading. If he continued to follow her up the river, there would come a time when he found some way to bridge the water. It behooved her to move swiftly, to reach safety before he had a chance to recapture her.

For a moment she considered leaving the river and trying to make her way through the forest, but she dismissed the idea with a shudder. She could get lost so easily in the woods! Her father had told her of people who ran in circles, losing their sense of direction. No, she had to continue to follow the waterway.

A new fear threatened her tenuous control. What if Lemelle could swim? Or what if he found a log and used it to help him cross to her side? But the fright passed. It was not Jean Lemelle's habit to get wet; the filth of his clothes and the smell of old perspiration on his body proved his dislike of water. Maybe, if she was lucky, this would help her now.

She crept behind a large rock and peered across at the big man. He was ranging about, obviously in search of some method of conveyance that would speed her recapture. All of her instincts were to run. But if she did, would she know if he succeeded in crossing?

She shook her head. It didn't matter! Either way,

her only hope for safety lay in flight. Rolling the rope in her blanket, she tied the bundle with the remaining strips from her slip and slung it over her shoulder. The gun she held in readiness. Then she leaped back to the shore and hurried into the woods.

When next she emerged from the protection of the forest, she found herself on a high cliff that overlooked the river. From her point of observation, she searched the far bank. At first there was no sign of Lemelle, and her heartbeat quickened. And then her fear abated. He was still there.

She could see him, not more than twenty feet from the shoreline, pulling branches from what appeared to be a broken tree. As she watched, he threw the last limbs aside and revealed a long, hollow log. She caught her breath. He was no woodsman, that she had learned during her journey downriver. And by himself he might have been a long time devising a skiff. But he had accidentally come upon the transportation he needed. Some Indian, maybe a hunter, had left his canoe—and Lemelle had stumbled upon its hiding place.

Carolyn studied him closely. It didn't appear that he had seen her, so in that she still had some advantage. But she would have to shoot him before he crossed the river, while he made a good target. Once he reached her side and lost himself in the woods, she would have far less chance of stopping his pursuit.

Dropping to her stomach, she crawled to the edge of the cliff and braced herself against a rock. Her hand would have to be steady, but she didn't doubt her ability to hit her target. Her father had insisted that she learn to shoot when she was still very young, and as in other skills that now helped her survive, she realized his wisdom.

Yet something held her back. Lemelle had freed the canoe and was pulling it toward the water. Its shape triggered a memory from the past. It was not

the ordinary canoe used by the Indians. Nor had it been properly hidden. It had been concealed in the center of a clearing, not on the edge of the river, as she felt sure it should have been.

And then she saw them. Circling the clearing were a series of upright posts, each one with what appeared to be a different head carved at its top. She felt her body grow stiff. Her father had warned her of such places, and once, when she was not quite twelve, John Haglund had taken her to see one, and to observe the ceremonies that took place on the site. The Indians had no special houses of worship, as did the settlers, but built sacred places wherever they believed man and the spirit-god could communicate. And they marked such places with a circle of carved posts.

She could only surmise the purpose of the canoe. It must have been prepared to provide some special spirit with transportation across the wide river that separated earth from the great hunting grounds. Or maybe some important chief had died, and the canoe had been carved as part of some pagan burial ceremony. Whatever, she would find out soon enough. Most sacred shrines were not left unattended.

When a silent figure detached itself from the dark underbrush, she suppressed a cry of warning. It was too late, she knew that. Even if Lemelle returned the canoe, and even if he were able to communicate his apologies to the savages, his life was doomed. No one —and particularly no white man—was permitted to desecrate the sacred enclosures.

Lemelle cried in alarm when the arrow hit his back, and then he fell forward. Immediately the canoe began to spin wildly and to drift downriver. Carolyn shuddered. She had passed white water well before she encountered the bears. If the canoe and its sprawled occupant didn't capsize before it reached the rapids, it would surely go down when it hit the rocks.

She lay silently watching the Indian, her body pressed against the ground. Had he noticed her? John Haglund had warned her of the alertness of the savages—and of their fondness for captured white women. If the guardians of the sacred circle had seen her, she would be in more danger now than she had been when threatened by Lemelle.

As a child she had heard stories about women who were captured by the Indians, and she knew there was no way to predict what might happen to her if she suffered that fate. Some were raped by every man in the tribe until they died from terror and shock. Others, for reasons none could explain, were taken as wives by single warriors. These women often survived to return to civilization after years of living among the savages, and they told conflicting tales. To some the experience was quite endurable—almost pleasant. Others returned with descriptions of mistreatment that left their civilized friends shaking with terror.

Carolyn had no desire to learn which stories were true. She remained motionless until the Indian, evidently satisfied that the sacred canoe would not surface to be defiled by another, returned to the forest. Then, still hugging the ground, she backed away from her overlook. Lemelle would bother her no more. But that didn't make her journey less hazardous.

Rising to her feet, she hurried back into the woods. There was always the possibility that the Indians already knew of her presence. If they did, she could be sure that sooner or later they would make their move.

But she would not wait around to see what might happen. As long as she was free she would continue toward home—toward the safety of Fort Pitt. Lifting the rifle to her shoulder, she padded quietly along the narrow path. She felt terribly depressed. Lemelle's death should have pleased her. Certainly he was no loss to the world. But the ease with which the Indian

destroyed the big man's life served only to increase her own insecurity.

As her eyes swept the silent woods, she wondered when her turn would come—and whether she would have any warning before death ended her struggle against the wilderness.

Seven

When first she sensed that she was being followed, she attempted to brush the fear aside as resulting from the fright she had felt as she watched Jean Lemelle fall, killed by a silent arrow. But it was not easy to rid herself of the unrest that traveled with her every step. She began to search the woods about her, prepared to shoot at any danger, and in her very wariness she almost fell victim to a far more real threat to her safety.

She was searching the forest behind her when she stumbled into a clearing, startling a puma that had wandered down from the mountains in search of food. Surprised, she came to an abrupt halt and raised her gun to her shoulder. The beast snarled and crouched as if ready to spring. Trembling from the tension, she cocked the hammer and took aim.

As she waited, not certain that she should fire, the golden head turned and the puma was off across the meadow. She lowered her rifle unsteadily and watched as the lithe creature pursued a fluffy-tailed rabbit. Then, as suddenly as the chase had begun, it was over. The puma retired into the brush with its catch and Carolyn hurried on, determined to put as much distance as possible between her and the savage hunter. And when finally she stopped to sleep, she kept her gun close to her side. Even high in a tree, she was not safe from the agile mountain lion.

Fish served as her main food the following morning,

augmented with those sprouts she could identify. As she disposed of the remains of her catch, she wondered if it had been the puma who had given her the feeling of being watched. She stood listening to the voices of the forest. Her training told her that such a premise was wrong. The little creatures were too contented. Were the puma still hunting, they would be silent.

But something—or someone—was still nearby. Of that she was certain. She felt in her bones—in the small of her back—that creepy sensation that eyes were fastened on her. But whose?

Her slippers disintegrated during the afternoon and she continued barefoot, comforting herself with the knowledge that in a short time she would regain the leathery soles that protected her from injury in the summer. She was certainly no stranger to the feel of gravel beneath uncovered feet. In spite of her mother's protests she often played barefoot in the river, aware that her father encouraged such tomboy behavior. Now she was thankful that she was not as citified as she felt sure she would be once she married William. She needed her woodsmanship to survive.

To compensate for the delay caused by her tender feet, she gave up the pleasure of a daily morning bath; it was too difficult to remove and retie her bizarre costume. But she washed her feet that night, letting the cold water pour over her hot skin, relieving the soreness that had intensified with each passing hour.

As she wiggled her toes in the cold water, she worried about the Indians. She was certain they knew where she was. Her father and John Haglund had taught her to respect them and their knowledge of the woods. But the only time she saw one was when Lemelle was killed.

Were they stalking her? If they were, why didn't they close in? The problem worried her throughout her silent dinner and as she settled herself high in a tree for the night.

The unanswered question remained to haunt her when she resumed her journey. She shifted her bundle so as to make her musket more available and tried desperately to remember everything she had ever heard about the habits of the natives.

Most of what she knew served to calm her fears. Her father had found a bad situation when first he arrived at Fort Pitt, for his predecessor had done little to ease the conflict between the Indians and the encroaching settlers. In order to be most effective, he had spent a week living in a nearby village, where he learned some of the language and became acquainted with many of the leaders of the peaceful tribes.

That had happened, Carolyn remembered, the summer before her mother had nursed an Indian squaw, Natona, through a severe illness and had assisted at the birthing of the infant she carried.

Robert Salford had found Natona half-drowned in the Monongahela River and had brought her into his home even though the other settlers warned him of the dangers involved. Carolyn, a child of twelve at the time, had been proud of her parents' generosity and completely taken by the helplessness of their guest. She had never seen an Indian woman before.

Natona hovered on the brink of death for over a week, during which time Elizabeth and her daughter applied poultices to her chest and back and kept her warm by wrapping her in wool blankets. The child had been born long after Natona was out of danger, on a frozen December day. The event was something Carolyn knew she would never forget.

Because the other women in the fort would not come near the strange visitor, Carolyn was permitted to assist her mother. It had been an unusual birth. The Indian woman had refused to lie down. Pushing the helping hands aside, she had squatted over the bed and had caught the infant herself as it emerged. Elizabeth Salford had been fearful that such an unusual sight

might frighten her daughter, but she had not considered Carolyn's sturdy constitution. It was Carolyn who took the baby from his mother's hands and sponged his body clean.

It was Carolyn, too, who became the child's nurse until his mother was well enough to assume the task. She carried the tiny baby wherever she went, pretending in the secrecy of her thoughts that he was her own. And in that winter Carolyn had matured from a child to a woman.

When spring came, Natona and Carolyn were constant companions. The infant shared their love—and bound them together. Until the day of the great migration.

The first braves had appeared early in the morning. When they reached the fort they paused and spoke to Robert Salford, explaining that hunting was growing difficult and that they were moving across the Ohio. The women arrived as they talked, walking behind their men and carrying all the bundles on long poles. They rested near the edge of the woods, watching the fort with wide, frightened eyes.

It was then that Natona appeared. A murmur swept through the cluster of mounted warriors, and suddenly one of them spurred his horse and rode to meet her. He leaped to the ground, and in a display of emotion most unnatural to Indians, took the child and held him close. Then, returning the infant to its mother's arms, he led the way to an ancient, wrinkled female who burst into loud cries of joy and embraced both mother and child.

Robert Salford told his wife and daughter what he had learned after the Indians had said their farewells and vanished into the forest. Natona had been picking late-fall berries and had slipped on a ridge of dirt. Her body had plummeted into the river. While the other women rushed for help, she had been washed downstream. Her husband had assumed that she was dead.

Natona . . . Carolyn wondered how she was—and how the child looked, now that he was a big boy. She wondered if his mother had even told him about the unusual circumstances of his birth. Did he know there was a blond girl who had loved him dearly when he was a tiny infant?

Just thinking of the suddenness of Natona's departure made Carolyn's heart ache, as it had that long-ago morning. She had waved good-bye, tears streaming down her cheeks. And she had wished that she could have held the baby once more. He was somewhere far to the west, now. And he was six years old. But to her he would always be the dark-eyed, solemn infant who had given her a momentary taste of the joy of motherhood.

Her thoughts occupied the hours and speeded her steps. When she came upon the dead embers of a fire she stopped in surprise. But there was no one nearby. Whoever shared her solitude had not waited to be discovered.

She glanced at the red streaks that slashed their way across the darkening sky. It was time for her to rest. Pushing idly through the cold firebed, she thought how pleasant it would be if there was still one ember that would spark a new flame.

It was then she found the flint, half-buried in the sand. She could hardly believe her good fortune. For a time she sat over the ashes, hitting the stone again and again and watching the spark shoot across the gray, unburnable debris. Then, tucking it in her waistband, she headed for the woods. When she returned to the stream, she had killed a rabbit.

A sharp stone served as a knife. The pleasure she felt at her discovery momentarily overcame her caution. She lit a fire and cooked her kill, inhaling the rich fragrance of roasting meat as she considered the possibility of spending one night on the ground.

When her stomach was full, her better judgment

returned. She buried the ashes under rocks and sand and climbed up into a big tree. But she felt a new confidence. For the first time since leaving Lemelle's camp, she believed that she would survive.

The remainder of her journey was easier because of her improved attitude. On the fourth day she waited until the sun had warmed the air, and then, in the shelter of some large rocks, she unwound the bindings that held her makeshift garments in place. She washed them in the shallow water, hammering them with a small rock until they were rinsed clean.

When they were spread over warm rocks to dry, she submerged and scrubbed the dirt from her hair. She didn't climb out until her skin was pink and glowing. And she dried herself in the sun, combing through the worst snarls in her hair with a stick. Then she dozed on a flat rock while her clothes dried in the sun.

She awakened suddenly with the certainty that she was again under observation. Overcome by panic, she pulled on her clothes and tied them quickly around her body, all the while watching the woods for some sign of her unseen companion.

There was no one in sight.

Yet the feeling persisted. She was being watched.

Her first thought was that another "hunter" like Lemelle had come upon her and that she would soon become a prisoner. But her fear changed to cunning. She had a weapon now. And she would defend herself.

But could she kill a man, even if he attacked her? Her father had told her how her mother had killed two Indians during a battle on the way from New York to Oswego, and Carolyn had been impressed. Her mother didn't appear to be capable of such strength. But Elizabeth had had a quick explanation.

"They were threatening your father. And I loved him. You'll find, my darling, that love will give you power you never knew you possessed."

As she did every time her mother spoke of love,

Carolyn had felt a momentary resentment. Elizabeth never acted as if she believed in Carolyn's avowed love for William Jaeger.

There was no time for such resentment now. It wasn't William she had to defend. But the fear persisted. Would she be able to act as quickly when it was her own life that was threatened?

She picked up her bundle, shouldered her musket, and returned to the trail. She would do it if she had to. No man ever again would treat her as Jean Lemelle had!

Throughout the day she was alert. But no intruder interrupted her journey. The feeling of being watched was just as strong, but she sensed no evil in it. It was as if she were surrounded by a circle—a magic circle through which no danger could pass. As if whoever was watching her meant her no harm—was, in fact, protecting her. She shivered with a sudden wave of uneasiness. It was eerie, as if she were being pursued by ghosts.

She slept that night on a cliff overlooking the river, far removed from the woods where, she felt certain, her unknown pursuer hid. She could hear the sounds around her that told of messages being sent and received by humans. Small animal sounds recurred too often and echoed in a circle around her. But in spite of her fear, the night passed in peace.

She ate hurriedly, still aware of someone watching. With the return of the sun, she considered attempting to trick whoever it was into the open, but in the end she abandoned so daring a plan.

It was then she remembered the flint. It had been odd that anyone would leave so necessary an object by accident. But what if it had been put there deliberately? Was it possible that someone was taking care of her as she traveled—someone who didn't want his presence known?

She laughed aloud at the thought, and her humor

helped her overcome her trepidations. She was dreaming. The only person she knew who might be concerned for her safety was George Nelson—and he was far ahead, on the other side of the fort!

The next night she determined that she would stop trying to hide. Why—when it was clear that whoever was following her knew exactly where she was? She killed a rabbit, roasted it over an open fire, and rolled herself in her blanket on the ground. She had yet to learn if she had the courage to defend herself with the gun. But at least she was not going to run any more.

When she awoke, the night had closed around her. The feeling that she was being watched was stronger than it had ever been, and she glanced around nervously.

It was then she saw him, and her heart began to pound. He stood just in the shadow of the trees, a dark figure—an Indian—with a somber expression on his dark face. So close to invisible was he that she passed over him and then, with a shock of recognition, she sought to reaffirm his presence—and his identity.

But when she looked again the figure was gone.

She stared into the shadows with a creeping terror. Had she dreamed it? No! She had seen an Indian, his feather headdress brushing the branches of an overhanging tree. She had seen him—and she had recognized him. It was the brave who had greeted Natona and lifted her child into his arms.

But then why did he pursue her without ever making his presence known? And why had he vanished as soon as she moved?

Maybe she was wrong. Natona's tribe had gone farther west! They had no reason for returning to Fort Pitt! And how could she be so certain, when all she had seen of him was a shadow? And what was he doing? If she had not awakened, would he have come closer?

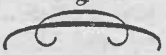
She shuddered. He was gone, and she had no cour-

age to give chase. But neither did she dare to leave the fire. She sat for a long time huddled near the flame until at last fatigue overcame her.

Her sleep was disturbed by dreams of Indians and confused memories of stories she had heard in the fort. Had Natona's brave returned to take her as a second wife? She had heard of such things happening.

From that night on, she slept in the trees, extinguishing her fire long before darkness closed in. He was nearby—watching her. And anytime he wished, he could draw near. Like a specter he pursued her—and there was nothing she could do to defend herself against such a phantom.

Eight



The presence never left her. As Carolyn padded silently up the narrow path, she felt him follow her. When she stopped to attend to her needs, she knew he watched. At night, as she huddled near the fire, she was certain he was standing in the shadows just beyond her sight, his eyes fixed on her person.

She wanted to scream, to yell out to him to show himself. But a timidity buried deep in her psyche held her back. The haunting fear persisted that it all might exist only in her imagination. If she shouted to him to come out and all that answered was an echo. . . . She shuddered. That would be the worst of all, for it would prove to her that her mind was breaking.

She wasn't at all sure he hadn't gone already. Once, as she hurried through the woods, she spoke aloud. Startled by the sound of her own voice, she came to a halt, her heart beating wildly. The woods were silent. She called out deliberately, and she knew it had been her own voice she heard. Trembling, she moved on, her skin creeping, the aloneness surrounding her like a shroud.

Sometimes it was the memory of Lemelle that walked beside her. She had been progressing swiftly, her thoughts well under control, when she heard a noise behind her. Immediately fear overwhelmed her senses. Lemelle! He had not been killed after all, and he was pursuing her. It was he she heard and felt when she was aware of being followed!

Frozen with terror despite the warmth of the sun, she crouched behind a thick tree and waited, her gun at the ready. She waited. . . .

Nothing appeared. The noise continued, thunderous and threatening. There *was* someone coming! And then abruptly there was silence. The kind of silence that tears at the mind and shatters human security. For one horrible moment even the birds were stilled.

She waited, trembling, for whatever it was—whoever it was—to make an appearance. But the path remained empty.

Was it—he—behind her? She whirled about, her back tingling from the touch of a nonexistent hand. But nothing—no one—was there.

At last, shaking inwardly, she continued on her way. There was only one comfort to which she clung. Each day brought her closer to the fort.

In her clearest moments, she realized the value of the lessons her father had insisted she learn. Once she found herself suddenly aware that the sun was setting and that she was sitting beside a glowing fire, a rabbit roasting on a spit. Startled, she looked about her. Had she met someone who was now caring for her? Slowly memory returned. No one had helped her. She had done it all herself. She had gathered the wood. She had prepared the bed for the fire. She had killed the rabbit and skinned it with a sharp stone. She had done it all without being truly aware of her actions.

She spoke her thanks aloud. "I didn't believe it when you said I might need this knowledge, papa. Thank you for making me acquainted with the wild." The silence closed in around her as she paused. Suddenly unable to endure the isolation any longer, she began to sing. She sang every song she could remember, stopping only to eat, and the songs renewed her courage.

When she resumed her journey the following morning, it was with another song on her lips. And the songs

did what nothing else had succeeded in doing. They kept the fear away. They built a wall of protection between her and her pursuer. And they helped her maintain her sanity.

She kept count of the days, each morning tying a knot in a strip of cloth left over from her petticoat. There were seven knots on the day her torment ended. She had eaten her breakfast in silence and renewed her singing as she rolled her blanket and put out the fire. Then, with one backward glance to make sure her camp had been properly obliterated, she hurried on.

Suddenly she was on a rise—and before her lay the confluence of the Monongahela and the Allegheny rivers. She stopped abruptly, unable at first to believe her eyes.

As she slowly realized that she really was close to the end of her journey, she felt a glow of pleasure. There were still ten miles of sparse woods before she actually reached the great *Y* in which the fort was located. That, and then she had to cross the Monongahela. But she could see it, at last! She was no longer alone with her haunting pursuer.

Quickening her step, she moved down the rise and was immediately surrounded by the trees. But they frightened her no longer; the vision of safety remained to comfort her.

She stopped in alarm when she saw a figure on the path before her. In her excitement she had forgotten her pursuer. Was he now coming to claim her—now, when she was so close to home? Did she have to face the violence and terror of another Lemelle?

Angrily she pushed back her fear. Never! She had a gun, even though there was little ammunition left. She had the gun—and she could cry out for help. Surely, as close as she was to the settlements, someone would hear her shout.

Dropping to the ground, she sought shelter behind a tree, the muzzle of her musket pointing up the path

toward the approaching figure. She was ready. When he was near enough, she would fire. Deliberately she drew back the hammer, confident of her power. She no longer felt a stranger to so heavy a weapon.

The dim figure stopped. "Carolyn! Is that you?"

She shook herself. Was she imagining things again? If so, this specter was more frightening than any that had preceded it. Was she so mad that her ghosts were talking to her now?

The cry was repeated. "Carolyn! It's me, George Nelson! Please don't be frightened! I've been searching all over for you!"

She rose to her feet, the musket held ready. "George?" She didn't expect an answer. As soon as he drew near, he would vanish as all the haunts before him had done.

But he moved forward again, his hands raised over his head. He carried no weapon.

She let her gun drop to her waist. If she needed it, it was still ready. But . . . Could he be real?

Her voice trembled. "George?"

Then suddenly she knew. She released the hammer and let her rifle fall from her hands. "George!" She was running, running toward him, hardly aware of the ground beneath her feet. "George!"

She felt his arms enclose her, felt his lips against her own, felt his breath, his warm, real breath, against her cheek. Her hands wandered down his back, touching, prodding, touching again. He was real! This, at last, was no dream—no imagining of a troubled, lonely brain. She was home. The world was right again!

She clung to him passionately, all the fear and loneliness draining from her body. Never had anyone been so welcome! "How?" She leaned back at last, her eyes fastened on his oh-so-familiar, wonderful face. "How did you know I was here? How did you find me?"

His laugh was joyous, lighthearted. "I didn't. You

found me! I—" He flushed. "I thought you had left on purpose, taking my horse in an attempt to repay me for"—he grimaced self-consciously—"attacking you. And I still wasn't sure when I found the beast grazing in the field not far from the fort. I thought you had gone inside and were daring me to recover the animal."

He pulled her close, and suddenly she was aware of his body pressing against her own. She drew back uneasily. It was wrong. She couldn't remember why, right now, but she knew it was wrong.

His smile was bitter. "Are you still angry?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. Please. I don't know how I feel." Smiling awkwardly, she brushed the worry aside. "What are you doing here? I thought you would have left Fort Pitt as soon as you could. Didn't you say something about traveling east?"

"Yes, but—" He flushed again. "Dammit, Carolyn, I couldn't go until I was certain you were safe! I've been watching the fort for the last week, waiting for you to appear. And then, two days ago, your parents left in a large caravan, and I knew you couldn't be there at all. I was certain they wouldn't have left without you, if you had returned. So yesterday I started scouring the river for some sign. What happened to you?" As he spoke he took in her unusual costume. "Where on earth have you been? And why are you dressed like that?"

She poured it all out then, how Lemelle had taken her from the fire during the night and how, after releasing the horse, he had put her in a canoe and headed down river. She could see George flush with anger as she spoke of Lemelle's cruelty.

"The beast!" George's expression was grim. "Did he" —it was not an easy question—"hurt you?"

She began to tremble. The terror of her experience was real again. Real—and filled with pain. "H—he hurt me so!" The tears she had held back during her

days of loneliness poured from her eyes. "H—he hurt me—and . . ."

He kissed her wet cheeks. "The bastard! The filthy bastard! I'll kill him!"

She clung to him now, holding him back from rushing down the trail. "H—he's dead! H—" She continued then, speaking of her escape and of the Indian who had appeared out of the woods like a ghost and fired one arrow that felled the Frenchman as he pushed his way across the river in pursuit.

George's fists worked angrily. "I wish they hadn't killed him! I'd like to wrap my hands around his throat and strangle him. He had no right to harm you!"

She wept again at his words. For the moment, at least, his caring was all that mattered. She offered no resistance when he took the blanket from her and bent to pick up the rifle. Nor did she delay when he led the way toward the branching of the rivers. She needed love—understanding love.

Later she would worry about the man who offered it. Later, when she was clean and the memory of Lemelle faded from her mind. Now she felt comforted—and warm.

He stopped when they reached the open fields and waited for her to reach his side. "I can go no further. There is no way I can enter the fort—or even the fields—in daylight without being captured. But you're safe. You can go ahead without me."

She stared up at him in disbelief. "You—? Where are you going now?" She could feel the emptiness returning.

"On to Boston. I have a score to settle with the British, and there are others who sympathize with the cause who expect me."

She felt suddenly frantic. He couldn't leave her. Not now. Not—yet. "But I must go, too! My parents will think I'm dead! They'll go to New York, and I

won't be there. I have to hurry, so they won't mourn too long."

He took her hand. "Surely there are others from the fort who will be heading for New York. Carolyn, I have not changed in my feelings toward you. I love you. I always will. But I must know what is in your heart. Do you want to hurry to New York only to disabuse your parents of their fears for your safety? Is there no other reason for your eagerness?"

Reluctantly drawing her hand from his, she lowered her eyes. How did she feel? She looked up into his face and her heart fluttered. Never had any face been so . . . precious. Then a doubt clouded her brow. Was it because she loved him—or because his was the first human face she had seen in seven—no, in nine days? Was it because he rose so quickly to her defense when she spoke of Lemelle's brutality?

Was such a response so unexpected? Wouldn't anyone who heard of her trial feel the same? Her father would have been equally angry. And so would William.

She flushed in sudden embarrassment. William! She hadn't thought of him for—for far too long a time. But he was thinking about her. He was probably wondering now what had happened to her. Maybe he was even organizing a search. He must be worried sick. And she had . . . How could she have brushed his memory so lightly aside?

She had to reach him as soon as possible. But could she travel with George, after he had made his feelings so clear? She gazed down at her hands, surprised to see that they were clasped tightly. "I must go with you. I can't wait. Please don't ask me to decide anything now. I'm too mixed up—too confused. Please, my mother will be so upset."

George took her hands and looked into her troubled eyes. "You haven't answered my question, Carolyn. Have you no feeling of uncertainty? Is the place you have given to William Jaeger still his alone?"

She lowered her eyes from the intensity of his stare. "I don't know!" Her voice broke. "I don't know at all! But—" She turned to face him, her back to the fort. "Please, I need time. And I must see William again. I must go with you!"

He stood silently, gazing out over the valley behind her. When she tried to meet his glance, he looked away. And she felt certain that he was wondering what he would gain by complying with her request. She knew, somehow, that he would not bother her again, no matter what she answered. But she could not speak. Not yet. His presence filled her with a deep glow of happiness. But was it love—or was it only because of what she had endured? Wouldn't she feel the same toward anyone who came to comfort her now? She glanced over his shoulder at the darkening forest.

She screamed and clutched his shoulder. "George! It's him! Help me!"

George whirled about, balanced and ready. "Who? Lemelle?"

She was staring as if bewitched at a lean Indian brave who was emerging slowly from the woods. And then she began to babble unintelligibly and grab at her musket.

George pulled the weapon from her reach. "Why do you want to shoot him? What's he done to you?"

Her hands clenched tight, digging holes in her palms. "He was following me! All the way—he was always following me! He—" She began to sob hysterically, pressing herself against George's arm.

He took her by the shoulders and shook her lightly. "Stop! It's over. He can't hurt you now. Wait here. I'll go and speak to him. If he's been frightening you, I want to know why."

She dared not watch as he moved up the path. It was a ghost waiting for him at the edge of the woods. A ghost. And when he reached it, they would both disappear.

When she heard George laugh, she looked up. The two men were talking quietly, though once in a while the Indian gestured back toward the forest. At last, with a farewell signal, the painted man turned and vanished into the woods. George stood watching him for a moment, and then he swung down the path to where she waited. He was smiling, and every once in a while she heard him chuckle. His eyes twinkled merrily as he reached her side. "You were afraid of that Indian?"

"Of course!" She felt indignant. How could he make fun of her misery? "He crept around like a ghost. And he was following me. I know it. But every time I thought I saw him, he disappeared."

George roared uncontrollably, bending over in glee. As his laughter subsided, he gasped for breath. "What did you expect? You were ready to shoot at everything that moved. There isn't an Indian alive foolish enough to show himself to a trigger-happy female."

She drew away, hurt by his amusement. "I was alone. And I—" She paused, anger replacing distress. "What did he expect? If he'd shown himself decently —in the daylight. . . ."

"You wouldn't have taken a shot at him?" George was laughing still.

She flushed. Maybe he was right. "But didn't he know he was frightening me? What was he doing, anyway? Why was he following me?"

George gasped again and struggled to control the upturn of his lips. "You don't know?" He looked at her sharply. "Did you recognize him?"

She nodded. "I think I did." Quickly she spoke of the winter when she had carried his child about in her arms, a nubile white girl playing with a live Indian child as if it were a doll. As she spoke, the heartbreak of the parting returned. "He's six years old now. I haven't seen Natona or her baby since."

"Your friend gave me a message from Natona. She

is undergoing the purification required of an Indian woman after her sixth birthing. But her son, White Feather, is fine."

Carolyn gazed longingly at the path where Running Deer had appeared. "I wish I could see her again."

"Maybe you will, some day. But"—he was grinning again—"don't you want to know why Running Deer was following you?"

She nodded.

"His braves saw Lemelle taking you down the river, and when Running Deer came to watch, he recognized you as the girl who had cared for his son. They were prepared to kill Lemelle themselves to rescue you, but you beat them to it by breaking away. Then it was too late. They could see you were hysterical, and they had no desire to be killed by a frightened female. So they kept their distance. Running Deer killed a bear that might have attacked you, and they stayed with you to make sure no harm would come to you." George stopped speaking and looked at her with open admiration. "He said you're a good woodsman. You found the flint they left you, and you treated the forest with love. He seemed sorry to let you go. Said you'd make a good squaw."

Carolyn shuddered. "That's what I thought he wanted." She told him of the one time she had seen the Indian standing like a ghost in the shadows. As she spoke, she began to laugh hysterically. It had been too frightening. And to think he had meant her no harm!

George joined in her mirth, and his open amusement helped her regain her self-control. "Well, thank God it's over. You're quite a woman, Carolyn Salford—quite a woman!" His face grew serious. "It will be a terrible shame if you waste yourself in Boston."

Aware once more of his penetrating eyes, she turned and hurried toward the fort.

He followed her for a few yards and then suddenly he called out, "Carolyn, please. I must get this settled."

She did not look back. "I told you. I must go to New York with you. But you mustn't press me."

"Yes, I know. I've already agreed, though it is not my wish. But you need new clothing, and we could stand more ammunition." He hoisted the bedroll. "One blanket isn't enough. If we are to make the trip together, you must take some supplies from the fort. Can you do that?"

She felt a weight lift from her shoulders. He was going to be a gentleman after all. "Yes. I can even bring my horse."

They crossed the river in a canoe George had appropriated in his search. Then, in the protection of the woods upriver from the fort, he settled down to wait. If you don't return by this time in two days, I'll go ahead."

She began to protest. Of course she would come! But he gestured her to be silent. "If you do decide to return, bring what supplies you can manage. It's a long journey, and I will not be safe at the homes of the settlers."

Carolyn nodded. Now that it was time to leave him, she felt an unexpected reluctance. George was constantly making fun of her, and he had shown little sympathy for her uneasy journey under the watchful eyes of the Indians. But he had been outraged by Lemelle, and eager to avenge her mistreatment.

She wanted, suddenly, to kiss him good-bye. What if, after all, he was gone when she returned? But she held back, aware that he would misunderstand her action. She lowered her eyes. "Good-bye. Wait for me." She turned quickly and hurried down the path. Just before she reached the open fields, she turned. She had waited too long. There was no one in sight.

She quickened her step. Suddenly she was not at all certain she would keep her word. There was a danger

in staying close to the handsome rebel—a terrible danger. When she was in his presence she forgot his opposition to the Crown, forgot he wanted to rouse the settlers to fight against the legal government of the land. Near him, she could not think of him as the enemy.

Her mind in confusion, she began to run. And when she reached the foot of the incline, she was panting for breath.

Nine

Carolyn was not prepared for the greeting she received. She braced herself as she approached the first farmhouse and Evelyn Johnson scurried out from the shadowy interior.

"Carolyn Salford! Whatever are you doing here—and in that outlandish outfit?" Her shrill voice carried over the quiet valley like the warning of a jay.

It would start now—the solicitous protection, as if she were a child. Carolyn winced as Mrs. Johnson quickened her pace. "That is you, isn't it, Carolyn?"

"Yes, Mrs. Johnson, it's me."

Mrs. Johnson stopped suddenly, her fingers fidgeting against her cheeks. "Carolyn? What's happened?" Her voice wavered. "Is something . . ."

Her scream cut through the stillness of the afternoon like the cry of a wounded bird. "Emil! What happened to my Emil?"

Carolyn stared at the agitated woman. What was she fussing about? Who was Emil?

As she stared at Evelyn Johnson's mournful face, her understanding returned. She had left Fort Pitt with ten men in a caravan heading for New York. So much had happened to her after the wagon train was ambushed that she had forgotten the terror of the attack. Now suddenly it all flooded back. There were ten widows in the settlement who did not yet know of their loss. And it would be her duty to inform them of their husbands' deaths.

"Oh, mother!" She barely breathed her prayer. "Why aren't you here to help me? I can't . . ."

But she had to. There was no one else. Tears began to run down her cheeks. "Mrs. Johnson, I'm sorry. He was killed fighting the mountain men. We were attacked the second day out."

"No!" The woman stood in the middle of the road, her hands beating on her chest. "No! Not my Emil! He's never hurt anyone!"

Carolyn stood helplessly watching the older woman struggle with her grief. Her mind was racing. What would her mother do? She instinctively moved close, and her arms went around the shaking shoulders. "Please, Mrs. Johnson. It was so sudden. No one expected it. I still don't know how I escaped."

She felt the heaving body grow quiet. When Mrs. Johnson looked up, her eyes were shining. "He was such a good man! So kind. . . ." Her voice was calm. "It's almost as if he knew. Remember how he insisted on taking young Gerald Harcourt's place because he didn't think it proper for a man to leave his bride alone?"

Carolyn nodded. It was all coming back now. And in the light of the loss endured by the others, her own misfortunes seemed trivial. She gazed into the suffering face and knew she could never put up with such misery. If she gave in to George's urgings, she would face the same loss, for as a frontiersman his life would be always in jeopardy.

They were no longer alone. Women from the other homes were pouring down the road, the news of the disaster spreading as they came. Each one who had lost a husband felt the need to get from Carolyn a recounting of just what happened, and the details of her own husband's bravery. Carolyn quickly realized that she could not tell the truth, that she saw none of the fighting. It would have left these bereaved women deprived of an important part of their loss. So she

described each man in detail, imagining how he fought —and finally fell.

By the time she reached the fort, she was played out, exhausted from the strain of comforting others. But she had to repeat the entire story once more, this time for a small group of militiamen who were preparing to set out to recover the bodies. If Colonel Salford had come upon the corpses, the men could relieve him of the burden and permit him to continue his journey or, if he wished—as he probably would—return only long enough to pick up his daughter. If the bodies had been hidden by the mountain men, then a search would have to be made.

When their briefing was finished, the men rode off, leaving the women huddled together under the protection of the few remaining soldiers. Carolyn was drained. It had been a far more difficult arrival than she had expected. When Mary Haglund took her hand, she looked up in surprise.

"Don't stay alone, my child. Take some clothes from your room and come to my place. I'll get a tub ready for you."

Carolyn met the haunted eyes. "You're sure it will be all right? I won't be in your way?"

"Of course not!" The chubby, motherly woman smiled and put an arm around Carolyn's shoulders. "I don't want to be alone. You'll be doing me a favor." Her voice was steady.

The sobbing continued as the other widows sought comfort from their friends. Mary Haglund lifted her head. "My friends, you must stop! This is hardly the way frontier women should behave, is it? Would our husbands be happy to see us weeping and submerged in self-pity? Don't they deserve more than this? They were all courageous men. Have they weaklings for wives?"

Evelyn Johnson was the first to reply. Brushing the tears from her cheeks, she squared her shoulders.

"You're right, Mary. But we're not all as strong as you."

"Nonsense!" Mary's voice had a touch of a smile. "We're all good, strong women. And we all have work to do! We can wait to mourn when we have bodies to bury!"

The weeping tapered off, and the women began to disperse. Mrs. Johnson was the last to leave. She let her hand rest on Mary Haglund's arm. "You're a brave woman, Mary. Thank God one of us has some common sense." A pained smile lit her face. "I've always hated emotional women. It shames me to think I have been one myself."

She turned to Carolyn, a warm smile on her face. "I'm thankful you're all right. You've been through a terrible ordeal. Later you must tell us how you escaped."

Carolyn nodded, a tremulous smile on her lips. It was a relief that the weeping was over. "Thank you. But—" She paused. Should she speak of her plans to go to New York?

Before she could continue, Evelyn Johnson trotted off, her hips bouncing as she walked. Carolyn hurried into her house.

It looked cold—and empty. The fire in the big fireplace was out, and without its warm glow, even the old familiar furniture seemed uninviting. The blankets had been taken from the beds and folded into large chests. Pots and pans were packed away. The deep chair in which her father sat after dinner was bare of its cushions.

A musket stood near the door, the one her father had given her on her birthday. She could not repress a smile at the memory of her mother's objections to giving a girl so dangerous a weapon. Her father had squelched the argument quickly by reminding Elizabeth of her own skill with the musket—and how she had saved his life before they were married. And of

course in the end Carolyn had been permitted to keep the gift.

Carolyn only vaguely realized that behind her own uncertainty regarding her fondness for frontier life lay her mother's insistence that she have a chance to know city living as well. "The girl should be free to make her own choice, not forced to accept ours. We aren't fair to her if we minimize the dangers or if we turn her into a tomboy. She must be raised as a lady—and she must not be swayed by our preferences."

There wasn't much danger of that, Carolyn mused as she opened a chest and removed a change of clothes. She had seen the dangers firsthand—and she wanted no more of them.

The fire in the Haglund kitchen snapped cheerfully as Mary swung the big iron kettle into the room, grasped its handle with a thick pad of cloth, and poured the steaming water into the tub, where Carolyn lay submerged. The heat spread quickly, and Carolyn wiggled her toes in delight. It felt good to be out of her clothes and washing in hot water again! Her skin tingled deliciously as she rubbed it to a pink glow.

"The young man—George Nelson—was he killed, too?" Mary's voice was steady.

Carolyn blushed. She had hoped to avoid speaking about her experiences. "No, he wasn't." She could not meet Mary's eyes. "He was escorting me back to the fort when . . ." She told it all then. All but one thing. She said nothing of the night when she and George had shared a bed—and when they had ended up sharing far more.

It was easier than she had expected to speak of Jean Lemelle, though she could not tell of his abuses. As she finished, she looked into Mary Haglund's face. Should she have been more honest? But Mary was already overcome with sympathy.

"You poor dear!" Her face was solemn. "You are

fortunate your father taught you to know the woods. And to think that your friendship with Natona helped you now! God works in wondrous ways!" Her expression changed. "What do you plan now? Is George Nelson on his way to Boston again?"

In spite of her involvement in her problems, Carolyn could not fail to notice the word *again.* John Haglund had been ordered to deliver his prisoner to New York. Were the rumors that had filled the fort true, after all? Were there people—neighbors of hers—who sympathized with the rebels? And if John had been one of them, was it possible her father hadn't known? She lowered her eyes. "I don't know. I left him at the edge of the forest."

She was terribly aware of her embarrassment, and of Mary's sharp glance as she replied. "The edge of the forest? He said nothing of his plans?"

Carolyn dipped her hair into the water and began to scrub it furiously. She was too confused to reply. It seemed somehow improper for so close a friend of her parents to be concerned with the doings of a rebel, even if he had once been a friend.

Mary had a big bowl of soup ready when at last Carolyn had completed her toilette. But the uneasiness remained. Grasping the big spoon, Carolyn began to eat, thankful that her obvious hunger served to delay further conversation. The soup was delicious. Steaming carrots and potatoes floated in the thick juice, and dark slivers of pork added flavor to the bowl. As she ate, Mary poured a tall cup of milk. "Eat hearty, girl. If there's anything I've got, it's plenty of food."

Carolyn nodded silently.

Mary settled across from her and poured herself a cup of home-brewed herb tea. "It's too bad you didn't arrange to travel east with George Nelson. Your papa and ma will worry about you. It's for certain they must have gone ahead. Probably the mountain men hid their

dirty work. Did you say they attacked when you were only a day from the fort?"

Carolyn nodded.

"Then if they'd seen signs of anything amiss your pa would have been back by now. He's been out three days already." She lowered her cup to the table. "Sure George ain't waiting for you?"

Carolyn flushed. "I—I don't know. I don't trust him. After all, he is a rebel."

Mary Haglund reached out and patted Carolyn's hand. "A rebel? Yes, I suppose he is. But he is our friend, too. Can you forget that you went to school with him when you were a child? He was always a good boy, and I warrant he still is."

Mary's words soothed Carolyn's unrest. "I know, but that is all in the past. He has changed; he isn't the same." She met the older woman's steady gaze. "Surely we must not be friendly with someone who has proven himself to be a traitor."

Mary Haglund's expression was marred by a frown. "Don't make the mistake of thinking that every man who wants liberty is a traitor. There are many good and honorable men who share George Nelson's dreams. In fact—" Carolyn looked up as Mary paused. But the older woman had decided not to continue.

"Have you had enough food? There's plenty where this came from."

Carolyn shook her head. Her stomach was full. What she needed now was sleep. What was it Mary Haglund had started to tell her?

A knock sounded on the cabin door, and Evelyn Johnson's voice cut short the meal. "Gathering at the fort! We got to thinking, after you spoke to us, Mary, and we decided it would be good to have a sing in memory of our men. Would you care to join us?"

"Sure, and why not?" Mary rose and pulled on a shawl. "Come along, Carolyn. The companionship will do you good. You can sleep late in the morning."

They sang all the anthems they knew, as well as many popular songs of the day, repeating more than once those that had been favorites of one of the dead men. Carolyn joined in enthusiastically. This was the sort of fellowship that was unique to the frontier. City people kept too much to themselves, even in so small a town as New York.

She wished suddenly that George Nelson were sitting beside her. He could not help but be lonely in the woods. Then, as she had so often before, she shook off her regret. He was alone by his own choice. It was his decision to be a rebel.

Angry at her inability to keep George out of her mind, she sang louder. George Nelson was too much in her thoughts. She should not permit herself to dwell on him, for such behavior was traitorous. It was not fair to William Jaeger! A girl engaged to such an upstanding officer did him a disservice to allow another man to take his place in her ruminations.

She was too preoccupied to notice the quizzical look on Mary Haglund's face when their eyes met, and her absorption continued as they walked back to the cabin after the songfest ended. She was not aware of the many times the older woman had begun to speak and then, as if thinking better, refrained from saying anything at all.

Ten

Carolyn awoke abruptly, as if someone had tapped her on the shoulder—or whispered her name. Blinking her eyes to clear them of the cobwebs of sleep, she stared into the darkness of the small room. She felt uneasy—as if there was something important she had to do.

Her thoughts slowly congealed, and she rose from her bed. George was waiting. She had to leave before Mary Haglund awoke, and she had to be on her way with the supplies needed for the journey. As she slipped into her clothes, she realized it was more than that. She had been made acutely uncomfortable by Mary Haglund's behavior the night before. She had no wish to confront the questions raised by her hostess's unfinished sentences.

When she was dressed, she looked around. There was nothing of hers in the small, neat room. She moved toward the door and paused once more. It seemed rude to leave with no word of thanks. Impatiently stepping into the large room that served as both kitchen and general room, she hurried to the outer door. She would only meet with objections were she to attempt to explain her plans.

She stopped once more as she opened the door and stepped into the damp chill of the night. When she heard a light snore emanate from Mary Haglund's room, she scurried on.

At the gate of the fort, she paused in answer to the sentry's challenge. "You all right, Miss Salford?" She recognized his voice, but she had no wish to stop for long conversation.

"I'm fine, thank you. I just couldn't sleep. Guess I'm still keyed up after what happened. I thought I'd take a little ride to watch the sunrise from the hilltop."

She could hear his concern. "You take care, now. Wouldn't do for your pa to find you gone when he returns to gather you up." He opened the gate a crack to allow her to enter. "Be right back out?"

"Yes. I just want to saddle Feather."

When she rode out, she was dressed in one of her brother's cast-off deerskin hunting suits, with a musket tucked into the saddle beside her. Behind the saddle was a roll of blankets in which she had concealed the best dress she could find among the few she had left behind when she had started for New York the first time. She also carried a comb, a pair of slippers, a ribbon for her hair, and a bar of soap. There had been a supply of dried beef and pemican in the larder and she had taken as much as she dared carry. In her belt was a small knife for use in the preparation of food.

She had left a note on the bed in her room. She hoped it would not be found immediately.

As she approached the woods she began to sing softly to herself. Trepidatious as the journey ahead might be, she could not ignore her feeling of pleasure in the predawn ride. The entire valley lay waiting in the cold moonlight. Soon she would be on her way to New York, riding beside George Nelson!

Impatiently shaking her head, she forced her thoughts to settle down. Soon she would be on her way to New York—and William Jaeger! A meadowlark stirred and soared suddenly from its nest. She looked up in surprise. The sky lightened considerably.

What a glorious day it was going to be! Watching the lark, she felt lighthearted and free. She smiled

and resumed her journey, carefully avoiding the introspection that might disclose the cause of her happiness.

George appeared on the path, just inside the shelter of the woods, and she reined, her heart pounding. Then, abashed at her responsiveness to a man she knew she should hate, she moved steadily toward him.

He waited until she was beside him before he spoke. "So you came after all! When the militia passed last night, I thought they were after me."

She shook her head, but he gave her no chance to speak.

"Then I realized no one had gone in search of the bodies—and your father obviously hadn't found them. It's been three days since he left the fort, and we were attacked on our first day out. He'd have returned by now."

Carolyn muttered something about being disappointed, and felt a surge of annoyance when she realized how convincing she sounded. When he swung into his saddle, she breathed a sigh of relief.

They came upon the militia's bivouac toward evening. Without a word George led his horse into the woods, skirting the camp. But when he reached a shelter on the far side, he reined his horse.

Before he could stop her, Carolyn dismounted and crept toward the road, keeping herself well hidden from view. As she had feared, all signs of the attack had been obliterated. Her parents and her brother must have passed by without any suspicion that she was in trouble. But the militia's search had already borne fruit. Near one edge of the camp, three forms were stretched out, covered with a gray blanket.

She looked quizzically at George. He had remained on his mount. He cupped his hands in front of his mouth and from his lips came the soft coo of a turtledove. He repeated the call once and waited, his head tilted to listen for a response. A shuffling in the grass

to their right sent Carolyn leaping into the saddle. But George didn't move. Instead he repeated the call again, this time more softly than before.

Suddenly a man appeared in the woods before him. George leaped to the ground. "Hank! Good to see you again!" His hand was extended.

Henry grasped his hand and shook it enthusiastically. "I hardly believed my ears! What are you doing around here? I thought you'd be halfway to Boston."

George threw his arm around Henry's shoulder and turned him toward Carolyn. "I was waiting for her. I realize she told you what happened."

Henry nodded in her direction. "Afternoon, Carolyn." His face was red, and he refused to meet her eyes.

She felt a rush of annoyance. She had known Henry Schuyler since they were both children! And then, blushing herself, she realized the cause of his embarrassment. Now he was known to her as one of the rebels! She stared at him awkwardly. Did he expect some reassurance from her? Well, she was not about to give any! Obviously she would have to tell her father about Henry—and Mary Haglund—when she caught up with him. But until then . . .

She bent down and held out her hand. "Hello, Henry." She paused awkwardly. He seemed to want more from her, but she felt as if her tongue were tied. At last, flushing again, she withdrew her hand and settled back in her saddle. She could see that her embarrassment amused George, and this served only to fuel her irritation. As he took Henry's arm and led him out of her hearing, she breathed a sigh of relief.

When he returned, he was alone. Swinging into the saddle, he turned his mount toward the road. "We can follow the highway from here on. No more chance of running into someone who'll stop us."

Her mind was in a turmoil. To think that at least one of her friends was a rebel! How many more kept their secret? More than once she opened her mouth to

speak, but each time she closed it in silence. What would she say?

"Henry expects they'll be on their way back by nightfall tomorrow. I hope the stench didn't sicken you."

Carolyn shook her head. "I'm all right. Aren't they going to bury the bodies here?"

"No. They'll sew them up before they return. Seems they all agree it'd be a comfort to the widows to have the graves nearby."

Carolyn shuddered. What a grisly cargo! "You realize I'll have to report Henry to my father when I see him, don't you?"

George didn't bother to look at her. "Of course. Wouldn't expect anything else." He was silent for a moment. "But . . . Maybe it will all be academic. There's great unrest in the Massachusetts colony, and it grows by the day. When last I heard, there was open rebellion. But now—who knows? There might be a full-scale revolution. Your father . . ."

Carolyn felt a surge of anger. "He's a loyal soldier! And so are most of the men in the fort!" She was sputtering, and she paused to collect herself. When she resumed, her voice was cool. "If they weren't, you would have dared to enter the fort with me. So there!"

His eyes met hers. "Maybe you're right. I did play the part of the coward. What I fail to understand is your devotion to the Crown." He stared ahead, guiding his horse through a narrow passage caused by overhanging branches. "Can it be you don't know the injustice that is being done to the colonies in the name of the king?"

She lifted her chin in the air. There was no need to dignify such a question with a response.

"Oh, you can pretend to ignore me if you wish! But you'll listen, even if you won't answer. Did you know that all industries in the colonies are illegal? That the British merchants have a stranglehold on production?

We're expected to serve as suppliers of raw materials and consumers of finished goods. But we're denied the opportunity to share in the profits."

Carolyn shrugged her shoulders. "What has that to do with Fort Pitt?"

His laugh was condescending. "Did you never listen to your father talk with others in the fort? You consume finished goods, too. Muskets, powder, shot. Where do you think that lovely Chippendale furniture your mother has in her home came from?" He shook his head. "Americans make good furniture, too."

Carolyn felt irked at his superior air. "I know that! John Haglund made all his own furniture—and it's as fine as ours. He's sold much of his work to other settlers."

"And every stick of it illegal! Notwithstanding the fact that John was as capable a carpenter and craftsman as the best in England, he was violating the law every time he put chisel to wood! And what about the lovely dresses your mother wears? And all the gowns you had that were stolen by the mountain men? Were they made from goods imported from Britain?"

Irritated, Carolyn shook her head.

"That's right, they weren't! One reason for your father's appointment as a commander of Fort Pitt was his willingness to encourage colonial industries. I have it from John Haglund that your parents have supported colonial independence—economic independence—ever since you were born!" Carolyn shook her head violently, her hand raised in protest. But he would not let her interrupt. "Don't bother disagreeing. I'm right, and you know it. Even if you do assume the pose of a fanatical Tory!"

"Stop it!" Carolyn's voice was intense with passion. "You have no right to speak of my father in that way! Why shouldn't I be a Tory? My mother is the daughter of a baron. And my great-uncle was a general in the British Army who came over here to help

build the militia, so the colonies could defend themselves against the French. How dare you say my parents are sympathetic to the Whigs? They're both good subjects of the Crown."

He chuckled. "As you will."

"Hold your tongue if you can't speak well of your betters!" She felt a flush of embarrassment as soon as the words left her lips. She hadn't meant to be quite that violent. But George seemed to take her outburst in good humor, even though he immediately complied with her demand.

For the rest of the evening, until they stopped for rest and supper, she turned away every time she caught him looking in her direction. Even the meal was eaten in silence.

A light rain was falling when they awoke. Rolling her damp blanket around her gown, she hurriedly ate the pemican George provided from the pack. By the time they reached the road, the rain had grown heavier. Carolyn leaned forward in her saddle, her head lowered. She was dripping, her hair pasted against her back and her shirt hugging her body. A rivulet of water ran over her forehead and snaked its way down her nose, from whence it dripped onto her saddle.

"Want to stop under the trees?" George's voice was loud, but the wind almost drowned it.

She shook her head, and a drop of water fell on her shirt from the tip of her nose. "Why? I'm soaked already."

When he began to laugh, she turned away. As if he looked any better! The water had formed a pool in the brim of his tricornered hat, and when he moved his head, it spilled in a stream before his eyes. His fringed suede shirt clung to his chest, outlining the strong muscles of his shoulders.

Suddenly embarrassed, she glanced down. She was in worse shape than he. The fine leather of her buckskin was pressed tight against the fullness of her breasts,

and the chill had brought her nipples to erection. She grabbed the front of the suede jerkin and pulled it away from her body, but when she released it, it fell back in place, hugging her as tightly as if it had never been moved. Haughtily she turned and resumed her ride.

As suddenly as it had started, the downpour was over. The fresh smell of newly wet grass and moist earth assailed her nostrils. With a sudden spurt of enthusiasm, Carolyn urged Feather to a trot. Her hoofs splashed in the puddles as she responded to the reins. She could hear George call out, and then, as if by agreement, they were racing up the road. She heard George pull up beside her, and she leaned close to Feather's ear. "Faster, Feather, faster!"

She could feel the horse strain beneath her, but her little mare was no match for the stallion George had rescued from the mountain men. He drew abreast and then slowly pulled ahead.

When he slowed up to allow her to rejoin him, they were both laughing. As Feather reached his side, George reached out and patted her neck. "You've quite a little horse there. Aren't many mares will try to race a stallion!"

The irritation had returned. Why was he always belittling her ideas and her possessions? "I've raised her from a colt. Got her from John Haglund. I usually don't race her. It isn't good for her wind."

He laughed again, his expression warm and friendly. "We can try it again, when the road's better. I have the feeling your mare will ride better on a dry track."

Carolyn nodded uneasily. She wanted none of his condescension! Her thoughts wandered back to the day when the tiny colt had been taken from its mother and given to her. Her father had chosen it, insisting that Carolyn should have a sturdy mount. When Elizabeth had objected, he had become quite adamant. "We don't live in a civilized land, where the child will

always be traveling on roadways. She likes to wander through the woods, and there are enough hazards in the brush without adding that of a delicate mount. I have no desire to face my child with the duty of destroying her beast."

Immediately Elizabeth's face had grown solemn. "Oh, Robert! I've always felt responsible for what happened to Fury!"

Carolyn, waiting for a decision regarding her horse, had been embarrassed when her father took her mother in his arms and the two of them stood silently looking out into the woods. When they became aware of her presence, they pulled her into their embrace.

"It was a wonderful time, Robert, even though I was terrified." Elizabeth's voice was gentle, and Carolyn blushed in discomfort.

"I carry the memory with me always." The pressure of Robert's arms around his wife and daughter increased. "Is it any wonder our daughter is so wild? She was conceived in freedom—a true daughter of liberty."

Immediately Elizabeth's face had clouded. "Please, Robert. We mustn't. It is important that our children be free to make their own decisions."

A frown creased her father's brow, and he released his hold on both women. "If you insist, my dear. But I fear this is the one point on which we will never agree, though I bow to your wishes. We have a duty to make our own attitudes understandable to our children. Roy sees how we feel—and he is, if anything, more opposed to tyranny than we. Why should we deny Carolyn an equal right to know the facts?"

"Please, Robert." The emotion of a few moments earlier seemed forgotten. "We've gone through all this before. I'm sure she knows how much we love the wilderness. All we have to do now is decide on her horse. Shall we have a colt sent from General Fair-

child's estate, or shall we give her a more sturdy creature?"

Robert nodded, his face solemn. "All right, my dear. But I fear for the day when she must face what we have held back." Her mother frowned, and he continued. "Well, let it be. As for the colt, I prefer that she have the more sturdy mount."

The discussion had ended there, though Carolyn had worried about it for days afterward. But she forgot her concern when she saw the colt. The little creature flitted after its mother as if blown by the wind. And she had dubbed it Feather right then, because, as she laughingly explained, "She floats like a feather!"

Now, riding beside the rebel, she wondered again about that conversation. Sometimes she had wished her mother would let her father have his way, for she was so often torn by the confusion of their conflicting desires. Yet she was aware of their strong love for each other. She had at last come to understand her mother's feelings when one time, long after she was in bed, she had awakened to hear them speaking.

"A woman's lot is hard enough here in the wilderness, Robert. I don't want our daughter to be forced into it when there is the possibility of choice. I have made mine—to be with you. Let her have the same freedom—please?"

When her father had murmured his assent, Carolyn had dropped off once more, somehow more comfortable with the dichotomy that shadowed her life. But her new knowledge did not answer all of her questions. George's comments about Robert Salford's political leanings had upset her, and she could not honestly claim he was wrong.

George seemed to sense her feelings. "We've ridden long enough. Time we let our horses rest. Pull over under that tree."

"Don't you think we ought to continue? It's a long way."

He chuckled. "It'll take more than today to reach the coast. Don't be so impatient."

She felt her anger rise again. "Why do you always treat me as if I were stupid? Is it just because I don't see things your way? Well, I think you're stupid too! Stupid—and ungrateful! If it weren't for the British Army, we'd all be citizens of France!"

Reigning his horse, George leaped to the ground and lifted her down beside him. "Come now, little Tory, time to rest. And I don't find a fight restful." Before she could pull herself from his arms he had released her, leaving her standing foolishly in the middle of the clearing. George left her no time for anger. With a grand gesture he dropped his bedroll near the large tree.

"My lady, would'st thou sit thyself down and watch as your slave prepares your repast?"

She flushed and started to protest, but he smiled beguilingly. "Please, my lady, don't let ill-temper spoil our banquet!" His eyes were sparkling, and she found she could not resist his tomfoolery.

Holding a nonexistent skirt in her outstretched arms, she curtseyed politely. "My thanks for your thoughtfulness. 'Twould never have occurred to me to make a picnic alongside the King's Highway."

The remainder of the afternoon was spent in friendly conversation, for when they had eaten their pemican and resumed their saddles, the good humor that George had instigated refused to fade. For Carolyn it was a great relief. She was tired of arguing, and the road to New York was far too long to spend it all in quarrels.

She awoke early, when the light of the sun had barely touched the sky, and sat for a time staring into the face of her handsome companion. He seemed so gentle while he slept. Watching his lips move as he stirred, she remembered how they felt, pressed against

her own, and she felt irresistibly drawn to his side. She rose and moved toward him, transfixed by her emotions. Then suddenly his eyes shot open.

The movement so startled her that she was momentarily unable to move. Standing before him, she was aware that if he reached out for her she would not have the strength to resist.

But George wasn't aware of her inner thoughts. A sparkle lit his eyes and he propped himself on one elbow. "Good morning. There's no bounty on rebels' heads—not yet, anyway."

She flushed. The spell was broken. "I—I was just going to the river for a bath. But now . . ."

He was on his feet. "Don't say that. You can still bathe. In fact I'll join you!"

He grinned when her eyes widened. "Oh, little Carolyn Salford! You're such a simple child. There's a bend in the river not far from here where you can bathe near me—but still out of my sight. And I promise I won't peek!"

She could not meet his mocking eyes. Pulling her precious bar of soap from her bedroll, she followed him to the river's edge.

He was right about the privacy. As the river took the turn, it formed eddies among the rocks, and when she felt sure he had begun his own ablutions, she removed her deerskin suit and stepped into the clear, cold water.

The shock of the cold on her bare skin brought a small cry to her lips, but she did not hesitate. Her skin tingling, she splashed water over her body and then carefully rubbed herself with the soap. She didn't rinse until she was certain the cake of soap was safe, but then, fully adjusted to the cold, she splashed about merrily, lay back in the water to let her hair stream out above her head, and reveled in the joy of her unexpected chance to be clean.

When she realized she was growing cold, she climbed out and lay on the rocks, already warmed in the morning sun. The deerskin suit was too heavy to wash, so she splashed water on its surface and scrubbed it clean with a stone. Only after she was dressed did she realize she had left her comb back at the campsite.

Immediately she felt uneasy. He had said he would call when he was dressed, and so far all she had heard from his bathing place was a melodious tenor voice singing a popular love song. She should wait until he was ready.

But then her hair would dry before she combed it, and she would a have difficult time pulling out the snarls. Slowly she moved toward the bend in the river, her face averted. She paused before she reached a spot where he could see her and redirected her steps toward the forest. And it was there, hidden by the trees, where she finally stopped.

George's song was too intriguing. She turned quickly, hardly aware of her act. And then she saw him. He was standing in the shallow water facing upriver, and he was scrubbing his hair with such vigor she wondered that he did not tear it out. But what caused her to stare was not his behavior. He was bare of all clothing.

She felt a warmth creep through her body, starting in her groin and moving upward to her face. And as it spread, she grew weak, as if her legs had turned suddenly to jelly. Her ever-present conscience scolded her for staring, but her body would not obey her troubled mind.

He was beautiful. His narrow hips topped long, slender legs that yet were filled with marvelous strength. His broad shoulders gleamed powerfully in the morning sun, the muscles rippling smoothly as he rubbed his head. The skin from his waist up was

darkly tanned, for he, like many frontier men, stripped to his trousers on hot days.

Standing out from the clear whiteness of his hips was his masculine part, surrounded by a circle of dark, curly hair. She had felt the pleasure he could give, but until now she had never seen so clearly the source of her delight.

She felt herself convulse, and suddenly embarrassed, she turned and stumbled into the woods. When she reached the campfire, she fumbled awkwardly for her comb. Had he seen her? Had she been quiet enough? Did she now face the misery of his teasing for yet one more slip from her stance as a proper maiden, affianced to a noble "leftenant" of the King's Army?

A tear crept into her eye, and she rubbed it away impatiently. Why was she so helpless in George's presence? What magic power did he have that he could distract her from all her resolve—just by being himself?

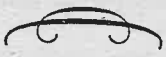
Her hair was combed and braided when he finally called her name, and by then she had retreated to her side of the bend and so was able to approach as if she had herself just finished her toilette. Nevertheless she had difficulty meeting his eyes, and even more, keeping her glance from dropping to the bulge that marred the smooth surface of his trousers. She had stared at his nakedness—and she had taken pleasure in what she saw. And though he might not know, she could not wipe the memory from her mind.

She muttered a prayer for guidance and strength as she climbed into her saddle. There was yet a long road to travel.

"Please, dear God, give me strength to resist his importunities. Hold before my eyes the thought of my love for William." But even as she spoke the prayer, she knew she lied. For the fear that clutched at her breast was not that her honor might again be besmirched by her handsome escort. What troubled her

was the uneasy realization that for two whole days he had made no advance. She dreaded the thought that he might take her at her word and maintain the aloofness which with each passing hour was growing more difficult for her to endure.

Eleven



She was bound, her arms stretched around a large tree trunk. Lemelle stood before her, his trousers open, his ugly red organ standing out before him. It was then Carolyn realized she had been stripped of her clothing. When had he caught her? What had happened to stop her from reaching the safety of the fort?

She struggled to cry out, but a gag locked her mouth open, and she gasped in pain. She bit viciously at the cloth that was stretched between her teeth, but all she succeeded in doing was to cut the corners of her lips.

Suddenly she was thrown to the ground and he was upon her. She felt the burning of his penis as it was forced between her pink buttocks and then, as the agony increased, she screamed.

"Carolyn, wake up. You're having a nightmare!" George lifted her in his strong arms and held her close. She smelled the fresh sweetness of his body, felt the roughness of the hairs on his chest scratching against her cheek. Gently he stroked her forehead, brushing the damp hairs from her face.

The horror of her dream faded slowly. She lay trembling, aware that only the firm arms of her companion protected her from the terror of the night. She was sobbing helplessly, pressing her face into the warmth of his strong chest.

"It's all right, my dear. It's all right. I'm here. I'll take care of you."

Slowly the shaking stilled. Gasping for breath, she looked into his face. It glowed in the dim light of the crescent moon. "Oh, it was awful! He . . ." She could not say it, yet she had to explain. "He . . ."

"Lemelle?"

"Yes! Oh . . ." She was crying again, but the cold hand of terror that had clutched at her heart was loosening its grip. "He . . . was hurting me again!"

He cradled her gently in his arms. "My dearest, listen to me. You must not let his cruelty frighten you so. He is dead. You said so yourself. You saw him drown. He cannot hurt you any more."

"But—but it was so real. I could feel him." Her eyes widened in fear. "Will I ever forget? Will it always be like this? Will I think of him, and . . . ?"

George stopped her question with his lips. He kissed her gently, kissed her mouth, her eyes, her wet cheeks. He rocked his body rhythmically, holding her in his arms like a child. And then he began to croon a song.

The tension that had filled her began to fade. She was a little girl again, and her father was lulling her to sleep after a noise in the darkness outside their cabin had awakened her. She was safe. Safe and loved.

When she awoke again, she was lying in her bedroll and George was moving about at the edge of the clearing, gathering wood for the fire. Two fish speared on two sharp sticks awaited roasting. He had not noticed that she was watching him.

She followed him with her eyes as he moved about. Remembering the gentleness of his arms, the comforting words—his nearness when she needed him. She could not have traveled alone. Not after what she had just been through.

He dropped a bundle of wood on the fire and when the sudden burst of flames subsided, placed the two fish over the open heat. Immediately the piquant odor of fresh, roasting trout filled the air. George settled on

a nearby rock and gazed into the flames that licked at the dripping juices.

Carolyn watched the play of light on his quiet face. He was so very handsome—and so kind. The memory of her nightmare teased the edges of her consciousness. He had been so gentle. He had held her in his arms and comforted her.

Suddenly she wanted to return to that refuge. Slipping from her bedroll, she stepped to his side. "George. Thank you for . . . helping me. Last night. I . . ."

"It's all right. I hope I didn't add to your upset." His voice sounded far away—cool. The kind warmth she remembered from her half-consciousness was missing.

She had started to put her hand on his shoulder, but suddenly she stopped. "I'm sorry that I bothered your sleep. I'll try not to do it again."

He looked at her sharply. The deep brown of his eyes was unusually bright. And then suddenly he was standing before her. His arms encircled her waist and he pulled her close against him. His lips pressed hers.

The tight muscles of her jaw relaxed. Her teeth parted. Her lips opened slightly. Her tongue met his. Met his, and caressed the softness of his lips. Her arms moved up around his neck, and she knew that the pressure of their closeness was as much her doing as his.

He lifted his head, and his face seemed to swim above her. "My dear, I want you. I will always want you. But I will not take you by force. If you want me to love you, you must come to me." He released his hold, and she felt herself teetering before him. His face grew solemn. "In the meantime, I want no teasing. I can take only so much." He paused. "What are your thoughts regarding your Lieutenant William Jaeger?" His voice grew hard as he spoke.

The change in his attitude hit against her consciousness like a slap in the face. Anger. Anger and hurt

wiped out all thoughts of love or thankfulness. What right had he to bring William's name up—at a time like this? But her anger did not completely obscure her shame. It should have been her lips that breathed his name! She should have needed no reminder that she belonged to another!

She lashed out wildly against the guilt. Her hand flew through the air and crashed violently against George's cheek. He looked at her in surprise—and growing anger.

Immediately remorse brought her to tears. Staring at her hand, which still tingled from the force of her blow, she gazed up into his startled face. "Please forgive me! I . . ." With a convulsive sob she threw herself on her bedroll.

They traveled the day in silence. But by evening George had mellowed enough to speak to her as he put her food before her. Carolyn hardly dared to look in his face. How could she have treated him so badly! And after he had helped her when she was haunted by Lemelle's ghost!

By the next day all seemed peaceful again. George seemed determined to ignore her rudeness, and Carolyn had no intention of renewing their disagreement. Still, there was a coolness that remained between them, keeping her from meeting his eyes when she felt him looking at her.

Even that unpleasantness was forgotten as the day progressed. The temperature was unusually high for the month of March, and by the time the two stopped for the night, Carolyn was dripping with perspiration. Her leather shirt felt heavy against her damp arms, and her hair lay against her back in wet strings.

George chose a campsite close to a stream, and Carolyn headed for the water as soon as she had tethered her horse. When she saw her companion vanish behind a clump of bushes a short distance

away, she pulled off her clothes and ran into the cold water. She lay for a long time with the crystal stream playing against her body, her head resting on a submerged rock and her hair trailing behind her in the current.

She could hear George splashing in the water above her, and she imagined how he looked, his strong, muscular body wet and gleaming, his face relaxed. Maybe he was even smiling! Then with an abrupt shake of her head that flipped drops of water in her face, she pushed the image from her thoughts.

When she splashed her way to shore, she gazed for a moment at the soggy deerskin shirt and leggings that lay in a pile on the shore. Impulsively she threw them into the water and hammered them with a rock. When they were as clean as she could get them without soap, she flattened them on two smooth rocks. Then with a hurried glance in the direction where George was still splashing in the river, she ran back to the camp. She pulled out the linsey-woolsey dress she had carried along to use when she reached New York. Its loose weave would be an improvement, she was sure, over the heavy closeness of the leather. She looked at her petticoat and deliberately rolled it back into her blanket. Then she pulled the dress over her naked body.

She was building a bed for the fire when George returned, and she looked up with a smile.

"You look lovely in that dress," he said. "You should never wear pants like a boy."

She felt a glow of pleasure. "Thank you. I was so hot in that deerskin."

He lifted his arm. "I've caught some fish for supper."

Carolyn was aware of the weight of his displeasure lifting from her shoulders. He had forgiven her at last. When the wind caught her skirt and blew it against her legs, his eyes widened and he looked away. When

he turned toward her again, the coolness had returned. His jaw was set, and his eyes shone a deep brown.

He speared the fish and let them rest against a nearby rock while he helped her start the fire. Then he sat beside her and watched the fish cook. "Carolyn, have you ever talked about politics with your father?"

"No!" His question caught her totally off-guard. And her response had been almost frantic, as if she feared to pursue the subject.

His eyes were dark—and they seemed to burn into her with a fire. "Why does that question frighten you?"

"It doesn't frighten me. It's just . . . impertinent!"

He threw back his head and a deep roar spilled from his throat. "Impertinent? You say the most surprising things, Carolyn Salford. Why impertinent?"

"Because—because he's a colonel—and you're a rebel!" She realized she was not making any sense, and she paused, a look of confusion on her face. "What does it matter to you what he thinks about politics?"

"Maybe it matters a great deal." He looked at her solemnly. "You have answered my question. He avoids the subject. Tell me, my dear, what do you discuss with your parents?"

She felt a flush of anger. "We talk about New York —and London. And the Fairchilds, and the Fentons, and . . . and the problems of the fort. . . ." She was becoming flustered. "All sorts of things. What business is it of yours? And why do you ask such personal questions?"

"Has he ever spoken to you about the war with the French?"

"Of course!" She was on firm ground now. "Many times. My mother and father met during the war with the Indians. My mother was escaping to America to avoid being wedded to . . ."

He continued as if he had not heard her words. "Yes, I know. But I wasn't speaking of their personal involvement, though it is a lovely story. Has he never

spoken to you about the difficulty the colonists had in getting King George to support the fight on our land? Has he mentioned the attempt that was made to impress our men for duty in India?"

She shook her head. She was annoyed that he had interrupted her story, and she felt irritated by the direction his questions were leading. "If you mean to tell me the king neglected the needs of the colonies, you need not bother. He sent many soldiers here to fight the French and Indians. He only had to be convinced that we needed his assistance."

His lips turned up in a sneer.

"Why are you so hateful? What makes you dislike the king so much?"

He broke into a grin. "Because he uses us as consumers and suppliers of raw materials—and nothing more. He allows the tradesmen in England to get a stranglehold on the neck of our economy. He thinks of us as barbarians!"

Her lips tightened. "If your only argument against him is the behavior of the British tradesmen, you are allowing yourself to get overwrought. What does the fate of a few storekeepers in Boston have to do with us? With you? You spend most of your life in the wilderness. You probably have never spent a day in a city!"

His eyes flashed. "Now you speak like a true Tory. What do you know of my past? Do you know why my mother left Boston and joined the settlers in Fort Pitt?" She shook her head. "Then don't speak to me of city life and wilderness. We might live in the woods, but where we walk today will someday be the center of a magnificent civilization. This land is growing!" He paused and his expression grew pensive. "Why do you think your father accepted the post at Fort Pitt?"

"Because he's a soldier—and a soldier goes where he is ordered."

His laugh filled her with anger. "Wrong! Your father

came to Fort Pitt because he has faith in the future of our land! He wants to foster the expansion. Have you wondered why he wears the uniform of the militia instead of his British redcoat—except when he performs some official function?"

"Why should I wonder at that? He stands out in the woods in his red. And besides, he commands an army of militiamen. But he's . . ."

"Yes, I know. He's a loyal soldier of the Crown, and he loves his king." George took his fish from the fire and bit into it with obvious gusto. A line of juice trickled down his chin. Carolyn watched him with growing irritation. She had lost her appetite for food.

He spoke again without looking up. "Do you know that your precious king has passed a law making it illegal to settle west of the Alleghenys?"

She shook her head. "You're wrong!" Tears welled in her eyes. "You have no right to call my father a rebel! He isn't one! Not at all! And I have no wish to speak further with you!" To emphasize her words, she bounced up and turned her back to the fire. When she was finished eating, she rose and hurried to the river to wash.

She regained her calm beside the flowing stream. Silently she rebuked herself for letting George get her so upset. He knew nothing of her father's thoughts. All he was trying to do was persuade her to abandon her love for William Jaeger.

It was dark when she returned to the camp, and George was already covering part of the fire with dirt, leaving a bed of hot coals well protected from any breeze that might spread them into the forest. She spread her blanket as far from him as she could, and she ignored his curt "Good-night" as she passed him.

She stood beside her bedroll until he lay down and closed his eyes, and then on a sudden impulse she slipped out of her gown and carefully placed it beside

her on the ground. Then she slid quickly between the blankets of her bedroll.

She was terribly aware of the presence on the other side of the fire, and her consciousness filled her with inner unrest. Why did he have such power over her —when she disagreed with everything he said, with everything he believed in? Yet she could not deny her weakness. She had felt the magnetism of his presence. And though his words angered her, she looked forward to each day beside him.

When the nightmare started again, she fought to awaken, thrashing about in her sleep with helpless terror. But the dream held her in a spell. Lemelle was back, towering over her, forcing himself into her body, shouting in delight when she screamed at the pain he inflicted.

Then suddenly everything was over. Strong arms encircled her waist, pulling her back from the horror, protecting her from the ghost that haunted her nights. She was being rocked gently, her cheek rubbing against the curly hairs on . . . In her half-waking state, she whispered one word, "William," and pressed herself deeper into the encircling arms. She could not rouse herself beyond the point of recognition that the horror was over. He was near—she was safe.

All at once a small voice in her head brought her to a wide-eyed awareness. He? Not William at all! George was holding her close and crooning into her ear. George was pressed beside her, and he was as naked as she! The warmth—the love she felt—was his body pressed against her own, and he was whispering softly in her ear. "Carolyn, wake up! You're having another nightmare!"

The terror faded, but the compelling power of the dream did not vanish. She was overwhelmed by the weight of her arms—of her body. She could not rise, could not move away. She had no strength to repulse him, no power to sit up and assure him she was all

right. No resoluteness that would help her to send him back to his own bedroll on the other side of the fire.

She stirred—and turned into his embrace. She knew she should pull free and run from his arms, but she could not follow her will with action. Her body needed the closeness—wanted the feel of his flesh against hers. Her body wanted . . .

She felt him move beside her. He lifted up on one elbow and his hand moved slowly down her hips to her thighs. He touched her lightly, but her legs had already moved apart as if guided by some inner compulsion. She rolled onto her back and lay waiting for him to come to her.

There was one moment of fear and then he was inside, moving slowly, rhythmically, stirring her into wild passion.

The terror was gone. Lemelle had turned this joy into pain—but Lemelle was dead! Gone! A moan escaped her lips. She knew now what had frightened her about her dream. She had feared that she would never again enjoy the touch of love. But George had opened her up to life again. He roused her to ecstasy and she felt no terror.

"Carolyn, my love, my dearest." The heat of his breath against her cheek sent a shiver of excitement through her body. "I want you so! When you are so near to me . . ." His lips sought hers, and his voice was stilled. Slowly the rhythm of his thrusts increased.

The fire within her grew with each movement. With a moan of delight, she pressed herself against him, willing him to penetrate her more deeply. Her thoughts were scattered, tossed by the wildness of her desire.

She was aware of a numbness in her hands and toes, and pure sensation, like wild sparks from some uncontrollable rocket, shot through her body. *More! Closer! Deeper!* Panting, she pressed herself toward his thrusts. Her fingers tingled when she touched his

shoulder. Her legs rose to engird his hips, but she was not aware of the movement. She knew nothing but his presence within her, nothing but the fire of his passion, burning, growing, kindling her own.

Suddenly she exploded in a frantic ecstasy. Her body convulsed wildly. She was lost—floating—fainting—sinking into heavenly, blissful, mindless rapture.

He lay still, but she could feel the throbbing of her body as he moved gently within her. There was a new silence between them—the quietness of love. A different lethargy overcame her. Her legs and arms were heavy, weighted down with a weakness she could not explain.

He withdrew slowly, but the warmth of the night caressed her damp body, comforting her for the loss of his nearness. And then a new weight as he tucked the blanket around her naked form. The weight—and then oblivion.

When she awoke, her arms were still thrown out, as if in her sleep she had searched again for his presence. The blanket barely covered her naked breasts.

There was a crackling of branches and she sat up in alarm. George was returning from the stream. His body was bare, and in the pale morning light the skin on his hips shone white below the tan of his chest. He was so beautiful! So much the opposite of Lemelle. Suddenly abashed by the forthrightness of her admiration, she lowered her gaze.

He caught a movement of her arm and hurried to her side, drawing her up into his embrace. "Breakfast is ready, my love. I caught a rabbit to celebrate . . . the wonder of today."

She could not completely stop the response of her body to his touch, but she did hold herself still—and pull away as quickly as possible. He looked at her in surprise, but he seemed to decide not to make issue of her action.

When breakfast was over and the camp cleared, he

took her hands in his. "Carolyn, my dear, you must say it now. Tell me you love me. Tell me that when we reach your father you will consent to my asking for your hand in marriage. Please, my love. With each passing day—with each night beside you—I find it more difficult to think of your belonging to anyone else."

She let her hands lie lifelessly in his. Was this what she wanted? The pleasure, yes. The passion of his love, yes. But life with him forever? If she married George, she would spend all her days in the wilderness. She might never again see the cities along the coast. If she married George, she would be wedded to a rebel. A wanted man! She would spend her time worrying for his safety. And she would weep. . . .

She shook her head as if awakening from a dream. "No. . . ." Her voice was faint. "I cannot! You don't know what you're asking!" She inhaled deeply, and a new quietness possessed her. "My father would never consent. . . ."

"Have you asked him? Do you truly know what your father would think?"

"I'm engaged to William Jaeger. I—" Suddenly she burst into tears. "I don't know. Please don't press me. Don't talk about it. I don't know. I . . ."

The warmth of his expression faded. "You don't know? After last night, you still don't know?" His face hardened. "What kind of a woman are you?"

She flushed, her mind racing. "Please, George, don't look at me that way. I can't think."

The hurt in his eyes turned them dark. "You would turn me away again?"

"Please." She was sobbing helplessly, her eyes averted from the pain in his face.

Slowly the muscles in his jaw tightened. "If that is what you wish. I was wrong to follow my impulse last night. I should have left you alone. Please forgive me.

I will not touch you again." He swung around and leaped into the saddle.

Carolyn mounted and pulled her horse onto the trail behind him. Her heart felt like lead in her breast, and the joy she had felt upon awakening was vanished. If only she had remained silent! The pain in his face—the hard anger in his eyes—his question as to what kind of a woman she was—she could not endure them.

But it was too late. The glory they had shared the night before was over. And now all that lay between them was the cold unpleasantness of her uncertainty.

Twelve

"Haloo!"

Carolyn had been following George with increased concern. Contrary to his usual practice, he was not avoiding the farm that lay ahead but was galloping directly toward the farmer who, resting at the end of a furrow he had just plowed, was waving his arms in what appeared to be a friendly greeting.

"George! Thank God you're well! We had almost given up hope of ever seeing you again!"

George swung from his saddle and strode toward the outstretched hands. "I'm glad to see you're in good health, Evar! How's my sister? Has she given you any more sons?"

"Aye, that she has—and an infant daughter as well. We have four boys now, and John is ten years old! You've been long away from your family!" Evar drew a pipe from his pocket, tapped some tobacco from a pouch and then, suddenly aware that he had no flint, stuffed the entire parcel back into his shirt. "What have you been doing, to keep you from seeing your nephews?"

George brushed a branch from a large log at the edge of the field and settled himself down. "Far too little, I fear. You have heard there is a price on my head?"

"Aye, and I wondered if there lived anyone vile enough to seek the reward. I will tell you that the entire affair has your sister worried close to being

sick!" Evar leaned one foot on his plow and let the reins drop over the handle. "You're staying awhile, aren't you? Emma will want to reassure herself that you're doing well. And we have news you might not have heard." He glanced up at the sun, which hovered low over the forest at the edge of the clearing.

"Ah, surely the arrival of my brother-in-law warrants leaving off early. Ground's too wet to seed yet, anyway. Come along! I can hardly wait to see Emma's face when she recognizes you! And the children! Will you believe that even little Robert keeps asking for his uncle? I suspect that John has kept tales of you alive, for even Emma's children are not smart enough to remember an uncle they haven't seen since . . . I think Robert was only two when last you were here."

Carolyn sat uneasily in her saddle. She wanted to dismount, but she was strangely ill-at-ease. The enthusiasm of Evar's greeting left her feeling the outsider. She felt awkward enough astride her horse; she was unwilling to stand to the side while the two men ignored her presence.

Evar threw his arm over George's shoulder and gazed up at her. "And who might this be? Don't tell me the perennial bachelor has at last found a wife!"

She blushed as George met her eyes, his own ablaze with laughter. "No, not yet at least, though I have made my wishes known to her. This is Mistress Carolyn Salford. Surely you have met her father. He should have passed by here but recently."

"Aye! The Colonel and his lovely wife! Their son, Roy, won our little John's heart by taking him hunting for a full day. They came back with three rabbits and a fine buck, which Emma has been busy preparing ever since. If we hurry, she can put on a roast. I'll wager you'd enjoy a taste of venison for a change."

George held up his hand to assist Carolyn from her mount, but she swung off with the ease of a boy. She had resumed her buckskins, and her hair was tied back

in a very masculine braid. But there was nothing masculine about her, in spite of her garb. Evar watched her with obvious appreciation, and he took her arm to help her over the rough field as they headed toward the distant cabin. He had released his horse from the plow, and he led it behind him until he reached the corral. George opened the gate, and Evar slapped the beast's flank, sending it trotting toward the stable. George sent his mount behind, and took the reins for Carolyn's Feather and sent her into the corral behind the others.

When the gate was closed, they turned toward the house. Evar was on his way up the path, his long, slender body moving easily up the rise toward the gate. Carolyn glanced from George to his brother-in-law. They were much alike, though their builds were quite different. George was broad-shouldered and well-proportioned. Evar was lanky, like a plant grown too far from the light. His sun-darkened face was hidden behind a thick beard which he kept immaculately clean, and his blue eyes sparkled out beneath heavy brows.

A tall woman stood in the door of the house, watching the three approach. She was full-bosomed, with a faint resemblance to George both in her build and her features. At her breast she held an infant, and another, no more than a toddler, clung to her skirt. Behind her Carolyn could see the faces of three more children.

The house, in itself, was a surprise to Carolyn. After her years at Fort Pitt, she did not expect to see buildings made of finished lumber in the middle of the woods. But this house had obviously been built with great care—and love. Carolyn wondered if there were a sawmill nearby, for she doubted that the lumber had been hauled all the way from the coast.

Despite the quality of the construction, the house was quite small, but she sensed a permanence about it that was missing in the valley near Fort Pitt. It was painted a shiny white, and a dark roof, made of

shingles, capped it proudly. Evar and Emma meant to stay. Carolyn searched her memory for some recognition of the farm, but she could not remember stopping there before.

Emma pulled her skirt free from the clutching fingers of her child and ran down the hill, the infant bouncing in her arms. "George! I thought we had lost you for good!"

His arms were out as she approached, and she handed the infant to Evar and turned to embrace her brother. "Oh, George! Thank God you are well!"

George released his embrace and turned to Carolyn, his arm still around his sister's waist. "My dear, this is Carolyn Salford, Colonel Salford's daughter. And this, Carolyn, is my sister, Emma Larson." He turned toward the house, from which the four boys had tumbled. "And these are my nephews. The eldest is John. The next is Glenn. Robert is the young man in the coonskin hat, and the little guy is . . . ?"

He turned to Emma, who filled in the name. ". . . is Walter."

He knelt and held his arms out to the four boys. "Come ahead, and say hello to your Uncle George!"

The children moved tentatively forward and then, as if he had suddenly remembered, John ran the short distance to George's arms. He was thrown aloft and caught in strong hands. Each boy in turn received the same greeting, and each responded with giggles of delight. Soon everyone, even the infant, was laughing, and Carolyn found herself joining in the warm reunion.

A sudden thought returned her sobriety. "Mistress Larson, did my . . ."

"Please, you must call me Emma."

"Emma, please tell me. Did my father ask after my welfare?"

Evar stilled his laughter and met her solemn gaze. "No. He spoke of your traveling ahead of him, but he showed no expectation that you would stop here.

Come to think of it, it is mighty strange that he should not have expected you to have preceded him."

George put little Walter back on the ground and looked up at Evar. "It is not strange at all. I was a prisoner, being taken by John Haglund to New York. It is not likely he would have stopped at the home of my own sister! Besides, it was planned that we should be much closer to New York before I made . . ." He stopped abruptly, his eyes fastened on Carolyn's face. "There was no wish to incriminate you, were I to escape."

Evar threw his arm around George's shoulder and each man took the hand of one boy. The other two took Carolyn's hands and walked—and skipped—beside her toward the house. "Georgie, my lad," Evar's voice was robust. "There is no one I would risk my life for as willingly. Fortunately, at least so far, there has been no need." He increased his pace. "Come. If my nose does not deceive me, Emma has anticipated your arrival and has food prepared already. And we both have news that might be of interest to you—if you have been as far from civilization as your appearance indicates."

They sat about the table, sipping mugs of herb tea from Emma's lush kitchen garden. It had been a full meal, and a delicious one. The boys had eaten quickly and when it became clear that their uncle wished to speak with their parents, had hurried off to play in the fading twilight.

As the last rays of sun touched the window of the small kitchen Emma rose and called the children in to bed. All conversation ceased during the flurry that ensued. Each boy had to kiss Carolyn good-night and say a proud "God bless" to their uncle. But they were eventually settled in a room somewhere in the back, and Emma returned to the table.

"Now, George, just what was the last news you

had of Boston?" Evar pulled out his pipe and lit it in the fireplace.

"That the port had been closed after the Tea Party. Has it yet been released from the stranglehold?"

"Nay!" Evar frowned. "The British seem not to learn, though such measures only foster riot. The militia has been officially disbanded, but the Minutemen are ready on a moment's notice to defend the freedom of the city from the oppression. 'Tis hard to think that it has been over a year since the spilling of the tea into the harbor, and no solution has yet been reached in our dispute. But that is not the worst of the regulations, by far, though the Stamp Act has wreaked havoc in our economy. 'Twas but a year ago that a new atrocity was inflicted upon us. 'Tis called the Quebec Act, and it turns all lands north of the Ohio River into the hands of the province of Quebec. The intention is to divide us with internal conflict, and thus to bleed off our anger in fighting with each other."

Emma clasped her hands together. "I have heard rumors that Colonel Gage recently sent a contingent to Charleston to destroy a store of munitions kept there by the Minutemen. His move was so secret that no one was ready to defend the storehouse and all was sent up in flames."

George scowled. "Why, that speaks ill of the Minutemen! Surely they can do better than that in the defense of our liberty!"

"They will in the future." Evar sucked in on his pipe. "They have organized a relay of signals that will permit news to travel from the center of the city of Boston at speed far greater than the swiftest horse. They will not be caught napping again."

They were silent for a time, and then Emma put her hand on George's arm. "Do you find it as difficult as I do to realize that it has been ten years since our father's death? You were little more than John's age

when he was killed defending the books and records stored in Hutchinson's library."

Carolyn looked at George in surprise. She had heard of the Boston riots, when a mob had forced its way into the lieutenant-governor's house and destroyed hundreds of valuable records from the past history of the colony. The destruction that had occurred that day was often used to illustrate the callousness of the revolutionaries.

George seemed immersed in his own thoughts. "I was old enough to realize the difference between revolt against tyranny and useless rioting. I will never forget the expressions of the faces of the men who carried father home. I wonder if ten years has been enough to help them forget the shamefulness of their actions!"

"You grew up in Fort Pitt." Carolyn spoke timidly. "How could you have been in Boston?"

"I lived there until I was eleven. In August of 1765 the citizens rioted in protest against the Stamp Act, and my father was killed. Despite his outrage at the Act, he stood in favor of moderation. But all such care brought him was death." He frowned. "After that the people organized into more directed units of resistance. The Tea Party was an example of the extent of their organization."

He sat for a moment in silence, his jaw working, and then he continued. "Mother remarried the next year and moved with her new husband to Fort Pitt. She wanted no more of revolting against the Crown. But Emma and I were already infected with the germ of revolution. Emma married Evar, who shares our feelings. When mother's new husband was killed in a battle with the Indians, she became ill and herself, died, not more than a month later. It was then I left Fort Pitt and aligned myself with the forces of freedom."

Emma smiled bravely. "Liberty means much to all of us. We would gladly give our lives for independence."

The three faces were solemn. Evar took Emma's hand in his. "Mayhap we will have to do just that. I hope our children will fare as well as Emma and George have. Yet, concerned as I am for their future, I still will do all I can for the cause. They must not live under the same tyranny that has blighted our lives—and the lives of their grandparents."

Carolyn knew she should respond with arguments in favor of the Crown, but Emma's words, and those of George and Evar, stilled her tongue. For a time they sipped their tea in silence.

At last Carolyn spoke. "Emma, does my father know how you and Evar feel?"

Emma glanced sharply at George, and in response to his message, looked down. "I—I do not know, Carolyn. I . . ." She seemed confused and uneasy. Then suddenly her voice steadied. "We discussed more immediate problems while he was here."

"But he knew John Haglund would not stop here, or he would have asked for information concerning our caravan! Surely, he must have some . . . ?"

George cleared his throat. "Come, Carolyn, we must let Evar and Emma get to bed. It is far past sunset, and they will be up at dawn to care for the animals. Besides, we must go on ourselves—as early as possible." He rose and took his sister's arm. "Emma, the big trundle bed will do us just fine, though I will make use of the board Evar made to keep the boys from fighting. It is a small concession to formality. We have not yet been wed."

In the bustle that followed, Carolyn had time to muster her thoughts and prepare for the fray she expected with George. When Evar and Emma began to spread the blankets on the bed and put the board down the middle, Carolyn turned to George. "How dare you let them think we're about to be married! I

refuse to be humiliated like this! I will never consent to share the bed with you!" In spite of her anger, she kept her voice low.

George drew her into a far corner. "I beg you to be silent. My sister and Evar have little room in their cabin, and there is no other bed we can use. If you show your dissatisfaction, they will be in a dilemma. I swear I will not disturb your rest. Surely, after I have proved my ability to stay away from you while we were alone, you can trust me with others nearby!"

Carolyn glanced from George to Evar and Emma. They had been so kind, and she had no desire to inconvenience them. She looked defiantly into George's eyes. "Then you must give me your word."

"I swear you will be unmolested."

Emma fluffed the down pillows and rose to her feet. "All is ready. We will see you in the morning. You are sure you must leave at dawn?"

"Yes. I feel a compulsion to reach the coast. Things are brewing there that I do not wish to miss. And Carolyn must be reunited with her parents before they become too upset. When they find she is not there, they might well try to return to search for her."

Emma nodded. Carolyn had told of the raid by the mountain men and some of the difficulties she had faced before she joined forces with George. Impulsively Emma took Carolyn's hands in hers and kissed her on the cheek. "Good-night, my dear. It will be a delight to have you for a sister-in-law." Before Carolyn could answer, she vanished into the bedroom with Evar in her wake.

George leaned against the table. "I will wait here while you go out and prepare for bed." He crossed his arms over his chest and settled back. Without replying, Carolyn pushed open the door and stepped into the night. Crickets chirruped around her as she scurried down the path to the outhouse. An owl hooted overhead. The moon was full, and its pale light illu-

minated her way. But Carolyn was impervious to the beauty of the night. Her mind was seething. How dare he give the impression she was about to marry him? She returned to the cabin determined to confront him with his falsehood.

But she had no opportunity to speak. He was waiting at the door when she arrived, and he immediately slipped out, leaving her to fume as she undressed and slipped between the covers. Her body was tense, and her fists worked in anger.

Yet when he returned, she realized that she could not speak. An argument would disturb Emma and Evar—and they needed their sleep. Forcing her eyelids closed, she feigned sleep and waited for George to extinguish the lamp and crawl in beside her.

She stole a glance as he was undressing, and the momentary glimpse of his naked beauty set her blood tingling. But when he looked in her direction, she quickly closed her eyes once more. She did not open them again until the room was dark and she felt him settle down on the bed beside her. His voice was gentle. "Good-night, Carolyn. Sleep well."

Carolyn held her tongue. When he got no response, he lay back. Immediately Carolyn opened her eyes and stared up at the ceiling. In the days since last he had . . . taken her . . . they always had slept as far apart as safety allowed. His nearness now upset her. And her thoughts would not leave the knowledge she had gained. So he had lived in Boston. The son of a merchant. Her mind was filled with unanswered questions. Had his father been an influential man in the community? Something made her think he had. Had George, then, received an education? Maybe he was not the rough woodsman she thought him to be!

Boston—that was where William Jaeger was stationed! What if George and William came face to face in the streets, one fighting for an illusory ideal called freedom, the other defending the right of the Crown?

The mattress shifted again, and George's breathing grew steady. Carolyn raised herself on one elbow and peered over the board that separated them. His eyes were closed.

But sleep would not come to her, no matter how frantically she courted it. George's restless movements dislodged the blanket that covered his body, and he lay bare before her. She let her eyes wander over his chest, his hips, then let them rest briefly at the crown of his loins.

He stirred and she dropped down quickly. She lay tense, afraid to signal her wakefulness by some sudden movement. If she woke him, would he take her, as he had that night when she had her nightmare? Would a mere board between them protect her? Was he really asleep? She lay still, straining to hear some sound that would mean that he, too, was restless, but he seemed unperturbed by her nearness. The thought that he should sleep while she lay wakeful roused her anger.

He could not love her very much if he was not bothered by her nearness!

The full meaning of her musing sent a trembling through her limbs. What did it matter whether he loved her or not? She was engaged to William. She brushed the thought of George from her mind. It was not his nearness that kept her awake, but her fear of another nightmare that might wake not only George but Emma and Evar as well. And the children. She didn't want to wake the children.

A small cry in the other room drew her attention. She heard Emma speak quietly and then pad across to the cradle. The sounds that followed told Carolyn that Emma was changing the baby and then taking it to breast. Small sounds of infant satisfaction stirred her emotions.

What would it be like to nurse a child? Gently Carolyn pinched her nipples, rolling her thumb against the hard nubbin of flesh. But her instincts told her

it was not the same. She would have to wait until she held her own child in her arms.

Her own child! Little White Feather had been like a doll—live and active, but hardly real. And Natona had nursed him. Carolyn had cradled Emma's baby and had felt the tiny hands pull at her shirt and had seen the small lips begin to work as if they expected food. But then she had quickly handed the baby back to Emma, and had watched entranced as she took it to her breast, not shamed at all by the presence of her brother and her husband.

George wanted to marry her. George had already . . . Carolyn stiffened. What if she were already carrying George's child? Her brow grew damp with perspiration. What if Lemelle . . . ?

Never! She could not—would not—carry a child sired by that animal! But if she had the seed of a child within her body, how would she know whose it was?

She stared into the darkness, overcome with dismay. She would not know for at least another week, when her bleeding would begin. If it began at all! She had to! She could not face the prospect of bearing a child that might belong to Lemelle!

Tears trickled down her cheeks. She had not felt repulsed at the thought that the child might belong to George! Did she then wish to bear his offspring?

No! Not when she was engaged to William. In a week both her problems would be solved—or increased. She would know if she carried a child. And she would be in New York, safe with her parents, waiting for William to arrive from Boston. Seven more days. Silently she prayed for strength to endure the torment of uncertainty for one more week. And the closeness with George Nelson. Seven more days and she would be free of temptation. Her life would return to normal. She would publish the banns and

marry William Jaeger. And she would never think of George Nelson again.

A drowsiness began to tear at her consciousness. Her body relaxed. With her last awareness she willed herself to dream of the wedding to come.

But when her night visions began, they were of George—and of the small infant that lay somewhere on the other side of the door, its soft lips suckling on its mother's breast. She had vowed that she would never think of George again. But her heart—and her body—knew that she lied.

Thirteen

George pulled his horse to a stop and motioned for Carolyn to do the same. They stood at the top of a rise, and the road stretched below them for miles. Mostly it was empty. But toward the center of their view rode seven horsemen garbed in the bright red of the British Army.

The day was young, and Carolyn had been enjoying the coolness of the early hours, aware that by noon the moisture around them would increase and she would be dripping with perspiration. In the days since leaving the Larson farm, she had learned to ignore George's reserve, for he seemed almost afraid they might grow close again. Though she tried to pretend ignorance of his motivations, she understood very well that he had no heart for a further rebuff—nor did he desire to be reminded of William Jaeger again.

He waited until she reached his side. "I must know your intent, Mistress Salford." His normally open expression was tight and unyielding. "If you have thoughts of turning me over to the British, I will leave you here, though there are few Whigs who would shelter me along this stretch of road. Speak, while there yet is time for me to act."

Carolyn met his eyes with anger and defiance. He had treated her with the utmost respect for the last week, and she sorely longed for him to hold her again. Yet her irritation at her own weakness exhibited itself in her behavior toward him. She wished mightily now

that she could bid her uncommunicative companion farewell.

Yet she had no heart to injure him. Traitor he might be, but she knew him too well, knew his sister and her children. She could not be responsible for his downfall. She met his eyes without wavering. "I have no intention of pointing you out to the authorities. I am certain your own foolhardiness will destroy you in time. You may do as you wish. I will not attempt to attract the attention of the soldiers." She could not stop. "I am certain God will not allow such perfidy as yours against the appointed king to go unpunished."

A faint smile touched his lips and then, taking the reins of Feather in his hand, he led the way down the hill. When they reached the soldiers, he paused. "Gentlemen, can you tell me where I might find the home of a Squire Henry Wilkers?"

Most of the soldiers gazed at the pair with suspicion, but one met George's eyes and smiled. "Wilkers? The miller?"

"Yes." George nodded toward Carolyn. "My wife is his cousin, and we come to do what we can to support the cause of law and order. It is my understanding that he has been much harrassed by rebels, who show great resentment of his loyalty to the Crown."

"Aye, that is so. You will be welcome there, I am sure, for he seems never content with the protection offered by the soldiers quartered on his premises." The soldier gave a half-salute. "Godspeed, my good man. If you continue on this road for about ten leagues, you will find him. 'Tis good to meet an occasional rider who shows the proper respect for the Crown."

George resumed his slow walk until the soldiers were out of sight. Then he tossed Feather's reins to Carolyn and increased his pace. She spurred her horse

and rode beside him. "How did you know who to ask for?"

"Henry Wilkers has made quite a name for himself as a Tory. It was only little more than a year ago that he was tarred and feathered by a crew of Whigs and sent packing down the road. But since the British soldiers gained reinforcements and his neighbors showed their true colors, he has grown quite confident of his safety. His arrogant behavior attracts many outpourings of resentment, however, and so he still bears the brunt of much mistreatment." He shook his head and frowned. "Anyone with any knowledge of this settlement has heard his name."

Carolyn flushed with anger. "Why do they mistreat him because of his loyalties? Surely if the freedom you speak of with such emotion has any meaning, it should include the liberty to disagree with the majority—if, in truth, your sons of liberty are in a majority."

"He would be entitled to his opinion, and welcome, if he did not refuse his milling services to any he knows to be desirous of freedom. And you have reached conclusions regarding the will of my friends —and me. We wish only to be treated like honorable citizens of our mother country. We resent the presence of Hessian soldiers on our land, and the billeting of the army in our homes. And most of all we resent the passage of laws that deny us the rights of free men."

"But what harm can there be in taking one soldier into your home—if you have one—who will assist you in defense against Indians and . . . other dangers? Why should they not be housed by the beneficiaries of their services? Or would you and your friends rather that taxes be levied to pay for the construction of ample barracks?"

George scowled. "Did you ever travel with your father?"

"Of course! When he was stationed in Albany, I rode often with him to New York."

"When he had troops with him?"

"He usually had some accompanying him."

"And did he billet them with strangers—without paying for their lodging?"

Carolyn felt her anger rise. "No, of course not! He insisted that it was important for soldiers to maintain their integrity as they traveled, and to keep their units intact. He would not permit them to disband while they were away from their base." She smiled. "I recall that many men considered him most cruel, though he spent his time with his troops and shared their inconveniences."

"You remember that?"

"Of course." She was angry again. Why was he questioning her so?

"Yet you do not recall the reason for his move to Fort Pitt?"

Carolyn remembered the move very well. She had been ten, eagerly anticipating the excitement of coming of age in the center of society in Boston and New York. And then abruptly he had announced that they were leaving civilization and taking up residence in a Godforsaken outpost on the far side of the Appalachians. Only her mother's understanding had kept her from weeping constantly.

But once the change was made, she had adjusted quickly. She loved the beauty of the land—and her mother's assurance that she would still be allowed to travel east for visits with her friends and with the Fairchilds and the Fentons alleviated her sorrow. But she had never received an explanation for her father's sudden decision.

She lowered her eyes. "I was too young to be given a reason for my father's move." Immediately she regretted so open an admission.

He slowed his horse and gazed into her eyes. "Then

you have been sorely mistreated." He paused. "But I cannot imagine Robert Salford dealing so unfairly with his own daughter! He is, among men, one of the noblest!"

Carolyn perked up at his words. She loved her father dearly, and resented any suggestion that he might do wrong. "I recall my mother and father having some disagreement." Her eyes widened. "Is it possible they—?" She did not finish her question. She knew the answer. Her parents had fought seldom, but when they did, it was in regard to her rearing. Her mother was adamant in her insistence that their daughter be given the freedom of choice. But had this necessitated the withholding of information from her? For the first time Carolyn acknowledged the possibility that she might not really know her father at all.

George seemed not to understand her silence. "How is it, with Robert Salford for a father, you see nothing wrong with infringing on the liberty of others by billeting soldiers in private residences?"

She made no attempt to answer. She had taken up the argument more because she did not wish to agree with George than because she felt strongly on the matter. And when she persisted in her private thoughts, he moved ahead and ended the chance for further discussion.

Her thoughts wandered back to the Larson household. What a surprise it had been to discover that George had a sister! She had been pleased when despite their intentions of making an early departure, George showed no hurry to leave. They had eaten a leisurely breakfast, surrounded by the eager children, and then George had insisted that they assist the boys in the morning chores.

Carolyn had been charmed by little Walter, who, hardly big enough to keep up with the others, had yet been the most skilled at finding eggs and slipping them out from beneath the hens, who seemed not to

resent his presence, though they attacked her when she tried to copy his actions.

The children had sung as they went about their duties, and their clear voices filled her with delight. And when at last she mounted Feather and rode out behind George, the children had trailed behind them, shouting farewell.

Carolyn realized that she feared for the safety of the happy family, and she remembered tales her mother had told her of another farm, far above Albany, where Indians had murdered Roy Anderson and his wife. Her brother had been named after that man, and she had, as a consequence, never been allowed to forget the dangers of frontier living.

But Evar and Emma showed no fear. Carolyn had asked George why they were so unrealistic in their approach to the circumstances of their lives. And he had found her question most amusing. "You have lived this long, and you have not learned that not all Indians are dangerous? What about the tribes that stopped to visit with your father when they passed the fort?"

"Evar and Emma have taken Indians in their home?"

"They share their produce when the hunting is sparse. And they have more than once given assistance when injuries or illness threatens the lives of their Indian neighbors. Despite the opinion of many settlers, it is possible to live in harmony with the natives."

"Is Evar troubled by the British troops?"

"Troubled? That is an interesting word. No, most of the troops remain near the coast, where they have the protection of the big ships. It is the opinion of King George and Lord North that there are too few colonists inland to cause alarm. They seem to believe that we become savages ourselves when we leave sight of the sea. In all the years since the war with France,

no one representing the Crown has bothered to understand the thoughts of true sons of liberty."

Carolyn had not bothered to answer. And she had continued for the remainder of the day in silence.

As they approached New York, George and Carolyn often passed soldiers on the road, and each time he pretended to be searching for some other Tory household. Carolyn grew increasingly annoyed with his deception, and decided to make her escape as soon as she caught sight of the city.

They stopped in a small town no more than a day's ride from the Hudson, and George led the way to a house at one corner of the common. He knocked lightly at the door, and when it was opened, spoke briefly to a man whose face Carolyn was not able to make out in the darkness. Then he returned to where she waited at the edge of the green and taking the reins of both horses, led them into the barn. When the animals were stabled, he led her up the back steps of the house into a cheerful kitchen.

A man and his wife greeted them at the door. "Carolyn, this is Aaron Gilford and his wife, Gladys. They will give us shelter this night, so you can wash the dirt of the highway from your face." He shook Aaron's outstretched hand. "Where are the girls?"

Gladys had embraced Carolyn, and she turned toward George. "We sent them to Philadelphia, to stay with my sister. Our Tory neighbors were belaboring them sorely, telling them that we were traitors. Oh, George, it has been a trying time for us both!"

Aaron threw his arm around George's shoulder and led him from the room. Immediately Gladys turned to Carolyn. "I put a pot of water on to heat so you can bathe. There is no man understands how a woman feels about cleanliness!"

Carolyn thanked her hostess and settled down to wait for the water to get warm. At once Gladys pushed a cup of broth into her hand. It tasted rich

with meat and vegetables, and Carolyn sipped it thankfully.

Gladys Gilford was a short, motherly sort of woman who seemed oddly out of place in so empty a kitchen. Her gentle features were lined with worry, and she shuffled about the kitchen with a nervous restlessness that made Carolyn quite uneasy.

At last she could stand the strained silence no longer. "How many daughters have you?"

Immediately the kindly face broke into a smile. "Seven—and dears every one! I think my husband would like a son, but the good Lord has seen fit to give us only daughters—so far. But God willing, the next will be a boy!"

The water began to boil, and Gladys poured it into the large tub that had been placed in the middle of the room. Carolyn stripped off her deerskin suit and stepped into the steaming tub. As she bathed she listened to a description of each one of the seven girls and she began to wish she had never broached the subject.

When she had finally washed the dirt from her body and her hair, she stood on a thick rug and toweled herself dry. Then, feeling delightfully free of vermin and dirt, she pulled on the dress she had not worn since that night back on the trail when she had ended up in George's arms. As the linsey-woolsey skirt settled around her legs, she remembered the touch of his skin against hers, and the memory brought a blush to her cheeks.

And then the worry returned. Her bleeding should begin. Shyly she lifted her skirt and felt between her legs. And to her relief, her cause for worry was over. Mistress Gilford was immediately understanding and helpful. Carolyn was provided with a bundle of rags, and only when she was properly protected from further staining did the good woman call in the men for supper.

They were seated at the meal when a noise against the window drew their attention. Someone outside had thrown a handful of stones toward the house. Aaron rose and pulled aside the curtains. When he returned to his seat, his face was drawn. " 'Tis them again, Gladys. It seems our neighbors cannot endure the thought that some feel differently than they."

George put down his fork and rose to his feet. "Aaron, is it my presence that has aroused their ire?"

"Nay, it is my presence—mine and my good wife's. As you know, this is a hotbed of Tories, and they have little use for one with Whig sympathies." He picked up a knife and began to carve the roast. "We might as well continue with our meal, if you can ignore the taunts and shouts of the mob. God only knows their harrassment is annoying, but so far they have done no real damage."

Carolyn tried to block out the shouting, which was growing louder each minute. "I noticed that your gate had been broken. Have they attempted to destroy your home?"

"Not so far." Aaron gestured for George to be seated. "Yet I fear for our safety. Gladys, poor dear, is after me to join the children in Philadelphia, but I so far have not agreed to leave. Our children are safe. But I fear that we will lose our property unless we remain here to defend it."

Carolyn's eyes were drawn to the window. Another stone hit the pane, and the catcalls and shouts of the crowd had grown louder. Her stomach tightened, and she could not swallow, but when she looked at her companions, she could see no indication that they gave any heed to the disturbance. Only Gladys was picking at her food with sudden, jerky movements.

Suddenly Aaron rose to his feet. "My dear, this is worse than before. We must find shelter for our guests."

Gladys led the way to the cellar. Her head was low-

ered, and she was clearly close to tears, but she obeyed her husband without question. At the top of the stairs, she paused. "You will find bedding and mattresses below. I regret being forced to so limit our hospitality, but . . ."

Carolyn looked at George. "We can't leave them alone! George, tell me we will remain and help them!"

He shook his head. "We must not. We will only add to their troubles. The chances are the disturbance will soon be over." He turned to Aaron. "If we can be of help, please call me."

Aaron nodded and as they descended into the cellar, closed the door behind them. The candle in George's hand flickered, but it continued to burn as they spread out their bedding and lay down.

Carolyn made no protest when George moved his cot close to hers, and when the cellar door suddenly opened and Gladys called down a cheery good-night, she felt reassured that despite the inconvenience the troublesome harassment would soon be over.

She lay for a time, trying to hear what was going on, but the cellar was too deep—and the walls too thick—for sound to penetrate. At last, exhausted from the days of travel and relaxed by the good food and the hot bath, she fell into a troubled sleep.

She awakened with a start, aware that she had been dreaming again of Lemelle. George was standing at the foot of the stairs. His head was cocked to one side, and the candle, still lit, was in his hand. When he saw that she was awake, he gestured upward. "Something has happened. I was just going to look."

Carolyn rose and hurried to his side. "Please, I want to go with you. I—" She paused to quiet the shaking in her voice. "I don't want to be alone."

They climbed the steps cautiously, her hand in his. When he reached the door, he stopped to listen. There was not a sound.

Carolyn pressed close to George. "We should not have left them alone."

He shook his head. "No, we spoke of it for some time, Aaron and I, and we felt it imperative that it not be learned that they had company. With the two of us free, there is someone to help them. They are, otherwise, alone."

Cautiously he pushed open the door and stepped into the empty kitchen. "Maybe they've just gone to bed." George's whisper seemed like a shout.

Carolyn glanced about the room. The dishes remained half-washed on the table, and the pot of water Gladys had put on the fire had boiled dry. She shook her head. "No. Something has happened. She wouldn't . . ."

"Look!" George pointed toward the back door. It stood ajar, and in the pale morning light Carolyn could see the barn. It was still smoldering, its rafters blackened by fire.

With a cry she was across the room and down the steps. The ashes were still warm, but she hardly noticed the heat. She was standing in the center of the ruins when George reached her side. "Feather—and your horse—they're gone!"

He grimaced. "At least they were not burned in the fire! Probably they've been stolen." When Carolyn began to weep he took her arm. "At least they are not killed. We will search for them later. Now we must find Aaron and Gladys."

She stared at him in dull hurt, unable to comprehend the extent of their problem. Slowly the awfulness drew her back to the present. "Aaron? Gladys? You mean you have not found them?"

"No. They aren't in the house." He took her hand and led her toward the common. They stopped long before they left the shelter of the bushes that surrounded the house. A circle of children were weaving around the center of the green, taunting two figures

that were locked in the stocks. Even from a distance Carolyn could hear the teasing voices.

"Rebels! Dirty, stinking rebels!" The words were horrible, but the children sang them in a singsong that gave them the lilt of a pleasant game. Carolyn recoiled in horror. "What is happening? What are the . . ."

George's jaw was tight. "It's them! The damn Tories have put them in the stocks!"

"Then we must get them out!"

"Wait!" He caught her arm and stopped her advance. "There will be no help given if we simply put ourselves in the same position. Feelings are high hereabouts. Henry Wilkers has borne the brunt of much Whig spirits, and I fear Aaron and Gladys have suffered equally brutal treatment from the Tories. At least neither has been killed. But I fear for the sanity of our country. Our fight is with the king—not with our neighbors."

"What are we going to do?"

"Nothing—until nightfall. Most probably they will be released then and we can help them depart for Pittsburgh. Come. We'll go back to the house and make ready. Maybe later in the day, if the townspeople lose interest, I can reach them with some water—and a bit of food."

Carolyn found it difficult to attend to the duties in the house. She refilled the kettle and when the water was hot, washed the dishes. Then she prepared some food for herself and George, which she ate reluctantly, aware that her host and hostess had neither food nor drink.

At noon, when the children had tired of their fearsome play, she gave George a skin filled with cold water and a large chunk of brown bread, which he carried onto the common. But before he could reach Aaron and Gladys, some soldiers appeared, and he slipped quickly into the brush.

It was not until late afternoon that they dared to try again, and this time Carolyn approached the two sufferers. She was undisturbed. Aaron drank thankfully of the water and chewed the bread she stuffed in his mouth. But Gladys was too faint at first to respond. At last Carolyn poured some of the water on the woman's forehead and then, when she was wakened from her stupor, gave her to drink and eat.

Aaron stirred restlessly. "Can you return after dark and set us free?"

Carolyn nodded. She had already noted that the stocks were not locked.

Gladys's voice was weak. "They plan to keep us here a second day. We must leave this place."

"Come as soon as you can after nightfall. We will be fine now. Thank you for not deserting us."

Carolyn heard a voice behind her and, startled, she scurried back to the shelter of the brush. She was met by George. "They are well?" His brow was furrowed.

"They are better for the food and water. Aaron tells me the Tories plan to keep them in the stocks overnight. But there are no locks. We can free them as soon as darkness comes."

George's eyes sparkled. "Tories? Are you not one, yourself? Why should it bother you to see two rebels punished?"

"Don't talk like that! They are our hosts. They have been kind to us."

"But they are rebels, nevertheless!" He forced her to meet his eyes. "Doesn't that make it acceptable for them to be treated thusly? You have shown no sympathy for the rebel cause before."

"But this is . . . inhuman!"

"It is common punishment meted out to accused rebels, nevertheless. In many places throughout the

colonies, where Tory sentiments run high, rebels are treated like common criminals."

"But the Whigs are just as cruel—or do you not find tar and feathering distasteful?"

He grew suddenly sorrowful. "You are right. Yet it is easier to see an enemy hurt than harm done to a friend. God give us strength to survive the war ahead!"

Carolyn was silent. Her prayer was that no fight would ever begin.

When evening came a soldier appeared on the green. He posted himself near the stocks and without a glance at the prisoners settled down for a long watch. George watched him sharply, and then, with a sudden brightening of his expression, pulled Carolyn to the edge of the common.

"You must attract his attention until I can get behind him. Do you think you dare walk up to him against his challenge, and keep him occupied?"

She nodded. Before she could reconsider, she stepped into the green and headed directly toward the stocks. Immediately the soldier was on his feet, his rifle aimed at her. "Halt! Halt—or I'll shoot!"

"Please." Carolyn spoke in her most beguiling tones. "I am visiting here, and I have had little chance to speak with a soldier. Surely, you will not turn me away!" As she spoke, she continued to advance. The muzzle of the rifle was lowered.

Suddenly timid, she continued across the green. When she reached the soldier's side, she gazed into his face. He was a young man, with hardly more than a down on his cheeks, but he eyed her with undisguised lust. His arms encircled her waist, and she was pulled into his embrace. His thick lips pressed firmly against hers.

All of her instincts demanded that she repulse him. But over his shoulder she had caught a glimpse of George. He was creeping across the green, a large

branch in his hand. If she let the soldier turn now, George might be killed.

Deliberately she let herself relax in the eager arms. The youthful face drew back. "Lie down!"

She stared at him in surprise.

"Lie down! 'Tis not often a soldier gets a willing maid in this Godforsaken land!"

In spite of her resolve, she began to struggle. His hands tightened on her wrists. With a sudden lunge, he threw her on her back on the grass. Never had she expected he would be so strong. He was upon her before she could cry out, but in his eagerness, he had failed to lift her skirt. With a curse, he rose up and pulled it over her head. She began to fight then, but before she had succeeded in breaking loose, she felt his body sag and he fell to the ground beside her. George bent down and helped her to her feet.

"You're a brave girl, Carolyn Salford. I'm sorry I could not get to you sooner. I had first to release our friends."

She swallowed angrily. He had ignored her struggle to open the stocks! Then, in a rush, she realized his wisdom. Aaron was assisting Gladys to safety, but it was clear that she was not strong enough to run. Without a backward glance at the stocks, Carolyn hurried to help the fainting woman.

When George reached Gladys he lifted her in his arms and ran the rest of the way to the house. Aaron, relieved of his burden, increased his pace.

Carolyn put food before them as soon as they entered the kitchen, and they ate in silence. When he was refreshed, Aaron rose. "We must leave now. Gladys, are you able to travel?"

"Yes. Let us go first to our children, to see that they are well. Then we can return and join the fight." She busied herself cleaning up the dishes, and then she put them down suddenly. It had only then come

to her that she was leaving her home—possibly for good.

Carolyn looked at her bruised wrists and the dark line of dry blood around her neck. But the sturdy little woman showed no further concern for her injuries. Within a few minutes she had packed bedrolls for herself and her husband, and the four travelers were on their way to the edge of town.

When they had safely passed the last house, they paused. Aaron took George's hand. "Thank you, friend. Had you not been here to help us, my wife might have died." He turned to Carolyn. "You are a good woman. Worthy of your father and mother. Give them my greetings when you see them."

He put his arm around his wife's shoulders. "Come, my dear, we have a long journey ahead of us. Thank God the bastards did not take our money. If a coach comes past us on the road, I will take passage for us both."

Carolyn watched in silence as the two moved away. Then all at once she broke free of George's hand and ran to their side. Impulsively she threw her arms around Gladys Gilford's shoulders and kissed her on the cheek. "Farewell. Thank you for . . . your courage. She turned to Aaron. "You know my father?"

"Aye. But who doesn't among the lovers of freedom?"

She was silent a moment. Then she took his hand. "Thank you. And good-bye. May God speed your journey."

"And yours. We will meet again."

This time she let them go. When she returned to George's side, she was deep in thought. "So you are right. My father is a rebel."

"No, I would not say that. Sam Adams is a rebel, and he and your father are often at odds. Your father wishes only to right the wrong that has been done the colonists by the misrule of King George. He

is prepared to travel to England if he must, to add his entreaties to those of Benjamin Franklin for a change in policy toward the colonists. He wants greater self-determination for us all, and an end to taxation without representation."

When she did not respond, he continued. "When I left Boston last year, Sam Adams was urging open revolt. He finally realized the importance of concerted action. The closing of the Boston harbor after the incident of the Tea Party has served his purpose well. Aaron told me that small bands of militia have sprung up throughout Massachusetts. He had forgotten that when last I was there, I trained for a month with one of them—in Concord. It is there I plan to go, to join them again."

Carolyn did not respond. She was still dealing with the realization that she had been wrong after all, about her father's political sympathies. He was a rebel; she could no longer deny it.

But her mind rebelled at the thought. They were lying! All of them—George, Evar, Aaron. She chewed nervously on her lip. It was possible that George could lie about her father to gain his own purposes with her. But what reason would Aaron have to deceive her?

George continued speaking as if he were not aware of her inner turmoil. "Aaron also spoke of the raid General Gage carried out on the munitions store. You remember—Evar told us about it. Aaron says that the entire countryside is aroused. They expect General Gage might make an attempt to wreak further damage to the cause. Sam Adams and John Hancock have left the city and are staying with Jonas Clark in Concord. We cannot risk losing our leaders."

Carolyn remained silent. She walked beside him like one suddenly deprived of her senses. One by one, she was examining every word that had passed between herself and her parents. Contrary to her earlier

remark to George, they had spoken of the future often. And the cause of the rebels.

She had no doubt that her mother and father were of one accord regarding the matter. Yet there had been arguments between them. Thinking back, she realized that every dispute had in one way or another involved her personal development.

She tripped over a protruding root in the road and fell into George's outstretched arms. But he righted her immediately, and he made no attempt to intrude himself into her consciousness. They walked together in silence, broken only when they stopped to eat.

They had both taken their rifles when they left the Gilford home, and she had slung hers over her shoulder. He held his ready in his hand. Dawn was almost upon them the last time they stopped to rest. He shifted the bedrolls which he had slung on his back.

"We can stop here if you wish. But we are quite close to New York. If we continue, you might be reunited with your family before noon."

She brightened somewhat at his words. "Then let us go on." She rose and lifted her rifle to her shoulder. She had dressed herself in her buckskin again, and with her hair tied back in a braid she looked much like a young lad. George looked into her delicate face and smiled warmly.

"I find it hard to understand your parents' handling of you. That a man as filled with love of freedom as your father should allow his daughter to grow up believing that he is a Tory is hard to comprehend. I swear, it overwhelms the senses."

Carolyn met his eyes without flinching. "I fear it was my mother's doing. She claimed she wanted me to be free to make up my own mind, that I might wed a man from England, and she wished me to be happy wherever I might live." She moved toward the road. "Let's continue. I must talk to them both, so I learn the truth. Whatever they have done, I am

sure it was with my welfare at heart. They would never deliberately do me harm. Nor would they intentionally mislead me. It is possible that Aaron has misinterpreted my father's words."

George smiled knowingly and increased his pace. They walked in silence until they reached the top of a rise and there, far below them, lay the Hudson River valley. And nestled near the mouth of the river was the small town of New York.

Carolyn began the descent with a new lilt in her walk. Soon, very soon, she would be at the Fairchilds' mansion. And the confusion would be over. Only George's hand holding hers kept her from breaking into a run.

Fourteen

"Halt! Who goes there?"

George muttered angrily and stopped in the middle of the road, his hand protectively over Carolyn's. She glanced at the sentry who had accosted them, and gasped. This man was a stranger! Had Kirk Greenwald, the soldier who had stood guard during the late afternoon when she was a child, been relieved of his favorite post? Then she smiled. Maybe he had advanced in rank at last!

"Who goes there? Stop, or I'll shoot!"

Before George could respond, Carolyn stepped forward. "I am Carolyn Salford, Colonel Robert Salford's daughter. I am expected. My parents and General and Mrs. Fairchild are in all probability waiting for me—and most concerned by my delay."

The young face twisted in confusion. "Mistress Salford, I . . ." His voice was gutteral.

"You will only draw a reprimand if you delay me further!" She assumed her most imperious stance.

He seemed to wilt before her, and then she was moving on, her head high, her musket slung over her shoulder. George followed behind, making no attempt to conceal his amusement.

When they were out of sight of the gate, he strode up beside her. "I have a feeling about this place. Something is not right. It is not General Fairchild's habit to make use of Hessians as his personal guard."

Carolyn felt a resurgence of the uneasiness that

had affected her at the gate. George was right. The grounds had an unkempt look about them. And there were no gardeners puttering among the clumps of bushes. She quickened her pace. When they reached the house, she glanced quickly about. The hedges that surrounded the building itself had not been properly pruned. Toward the back of the house, the kitchen garden was still ragged with old stalks of bearing plants and straggling weeds.

Running up the steps, she hammered at the front door. It was thrown open immediately, but she did not recognize the soldier who greeted her. His face was set and hard. "Who goes there?"

Her eyes flashed. "I'm tired of being challenged at every step! I am . . ." She repeated her name and her reason for arriving. Then, without waiting for the guard to let her pass, she pushed his musket aside and ran into the house.

She almost fell into her mother's arms.

After the first surprise she burst into tears of joy, hugging her mother to her and repeating over and over again how glad she was to at last be reunited with her family. George cleared his throat. "Lady Salford! I am pleased to see you again!"

Elizabeth Salford looked up into the dark brown eyes. "George Nelson! What are you doing here? And with my Carolyn?" She stopped suddenly, looked into Carolyn's questioning eyes, and swallowed hard.

Carolyn felt her anger rising. "Mother! What . . . ? How . . . ? It isn't right. You greet George as if you expected to find him freed. He was sent east as a prisoner. He belongs in a prison ship—on his way to England!"

George took her by the shoulders. "Carolyn, stop. Can't you see that your mother is troubled with other things now? Look at her!"

Her jaw clamped stubbornly, Carolyn turned and gazed into her mother's face. At first Elizabeth re-

fused to meet her daughter's eyes. Then tears began to flow down her cheeks, and she dabbed them lightly with her kerchief. "George is right. It's your Grandpa Arthur. He's dying."

Carolyn felt her throat constrict. General Arthur Fairchild had been like a grandfather to her! He had taught her many things—and played with her when she was little.

"I must see him! Where is he?"

Elizabeth's face was calm once more. "In a moment. First I must learn what happened to you. We were fearful for your safety when we arrived and you were not here."

Briefly Carolyn spoke of the raid by the mountain men. She said nothing about the massacre of the men in the caravan, but she did make it appear that she and George were somehow separated from the others and that they had faced many difficulties in their journey east.

Elizabeth listened in silence. When Carolyn paused, she cleared her throat. "I have the feeling you have left out much of importance. But what truly matters is that you are both alive—and safe." She paused. "As safe as you can be . . . here." She moved toward the circular staircase. "Come now. I know the general will be glad to see you."

Carolyn climbed the steps behind her mother, and as she reached the great door to the master bedroom, she recalled the only other time she had entered that awesome room. She had been no more than seven, and Grandma Genevive had sent her up with a cup of toddy for Grandpa Arthur, who was suffering from a case of gout. She had walked so carefully, balancing the saucer in her hands, and she had been proud when she reached her destination without spilling a drop. Then Arthur Fairchild had taken the cup from her and splashed it all over the rug—and his satin breeches. She repressed a smile. He had cursed at

his clumsiness—and she had burst into tears. It had taken her mother a considerable effort to get the child to divulge the reason for her upset.

And now he was dying. Carolyn looked at her mother's delicate shoulders and slender, aristocratic neck and head. She had often heard the tale of her mother's escape from England, and her adventures along the Hudson River. But what always charmed her the most were the stories of the days Elizabeth had spent pretending to be Arthur Fairchild's niece. She had come so close to being shipped back to England!

But instead her mother and father had been married in this house. Carolyn had visited it often as a child. It was like a second home to her.

George pulled the door open and stepped back to let the two women enter. Then he followed them and closed it quietly behind him.

Carolyn was only vaguely aware of his actions. She saw the room first. The thick Oriental rug and the heavy velvet drapes. She saw the needlepoint chairs her grandmother had sewn as she sat in the garden. She saw the orange sun, tinting the white walls with gold.

And she saw the bed.

In the middle of the large white expanse lay the general. He had always been a robust man, with a florid face that spoke of his love of good food and wines. But now he lay wasted, his arms bony and thin, his hands, clawlike, clutching feebly at the brocade of the spread. His cheeks were emaciated, and his dark eyes gazed out at her from deep hollows.

Kneeling beside the bed was Genevive. She was dressed as she always was, in a simple gown with a wide white collar and a ruffled cap that covered her piled-up hair. She looked up from her prayers as Carolyn entered and for one moment her face brightened with a smile of recognition. Then she lowered

her face into her hands, and her fingers tightened together.

Carolyn was hardly conscious of her mother moving toward the bed and assuming a place beside Genevive, nor did she realize that George was standing at the foot of the bed. Her attention was on the quiet face of her grandfather.

He had held her on his knees when she was tiny, and he had helped her learn to ride when even her father had been fearful that she was too young to hold her saddle.

"Grandpa Arthur!" Her voice caressed his ears. She stood beside the bed, facing her mother and Grandma Genevive, and then with a cry of alarm she dropped to her knees.

The thin hand on the counterpane moved—lifted up—and came to rest on her head. "Carrie! My own little Carrie!" The ancient voice crackled. "I prayed that you would come before I had to go."

Carolyn raised her head and the hand fell to the bed. Immediately she caught it in her fingers and held it to her lips. "Grandpa! Don't say things like that! You aren't going to die! You'll be up yelling at the servants in no time at all!"

He shook his head, and his dark eyes held hers. "No, my dear, though if anything could bring me life, seeing you again would be it. I only prayed that I might live to see you one last time. Now I can go in peace." His voice was weak, and she leaned closer to hear. His eyes closed, and his breathing grew uneven.

Suddenly his eyes opened and he gazed into George Nelson's tortured face. "Georgie. I'll be seeing your pa soon. I'll tell him you've been a good man." As if the strain of such enthusiasm was too much to bear, he closed his eyes again, and this time he lay quietly, his breath labored.

Carolyn looked up into George's face. "You never told me you knew the general."

"You never asked me. He used to visit my father when he came to Boston. I knew him very well—and have always admired him."

The room was silent except for the general's heavy breathing and the stifled sobs of the women. Then abruptly Arthur Fairchild squeezed Carolyn's hand. "My dear, kiss me farewell. I wish to be alone with my Genevive."

Carolyn rose. Tears streaming down her cheeks, she kissed the withered brow. His arm trembled as he took her chin in his hand. "Don't cry, my child. Life will not end because I am gone. We will see each other again." A wry smile lit his face. "In truth, I look forward to a visit with your grand-uncle. I have missed him sorely."

As Carolyn left the bed, George took her place. He held the old man's hand in his own, and then with his head lowered, he stumbled toward the door. Carolyn stood beside him as her mother kissed the old man's cheeks and with a gentle pat on Genevive Fairchild's shoulder, tiptoed to the door. The three crept quietly out. As she closed the door, Carolyn saw Genevive settle once more beside her husband, his hand clasped in hers.

Elizabeth Salford pulled her daughter to a nearby couch. "You must tell me what has happened to John Haglund—and the others. So far you have told me only of your journey with George from the fort." The lines of worry on her face suddenly seemed deeper than they had ever been before.

She wept again when Carolyn told her of the massacre by the mountain men, and, her face furrowed with concern, she pressed Carolyn for more information about her escape.

Suddenly George rose to his feet. "Madam Salford, I beg your forgiveness for interrupting your reunion. But I must know. Where is Colonel Salford?"

"He and Roy left for Boston a week ago." Her

face darkened. "Had he known Arthur was so ill, he would have delayed his departure."

"Does he go to join Adams?"

But Elizabeth was looking again at Carolyn. "My dear, you must leave this place—now! Feelings are rising at a terrible rate." She looked up at George. "You will not be safe here. And your presence will endanger Genevive—and the general."

Swiftly Carolyn rose to her feet. "Mother! I must know! I—how could you have deceived me so badly? I had no understanding that you and papa favored the Whigs. How could you—he—have done this to me?"

Elizabeth looked up at her daughter's face. But there was no shame in her eyes. Her voice rose. "Carolyn Salford! How dare you speak of your father in such a tone? Whatever we have done, we did for your welfare." She paused, and in the silence that followed, the resolute expression faded, to be replaced by a look of strained agony. "Oh, my darling!" Her arms were around Carolyn's waist and the two women clung to each other. "We meant you no harm! Nor should you blame your father. He fought me often on this very point. But I had seen you play with my laces, and I had heard your games in which you acted the part of a lady of the court! How could I, by the very things I taught you, deny you the chance for that life?" She pulled Carolyn back to the couch. "I knew if we raised you as Roy was raised, you would never fit into the ways of London. Was I wrong to fight for your chance to make the decision yourself?"

Carolyn waited until the pounding of her heart was stilled. George had been right, after all! She looked up, and met his steady gaze. Then she turned quickly to her mother. "No, mother, nothing you have ever done was wrong! How can I be angry because you loved me? I cannot blame you for your understanding of my dreams." She paused. "But it has

been difficult. I . . . was it planned that George should escape?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "I—I don't know, my dear. Some things your father did not tell me." She glanced toward the bedroom door. It remained tightly closed. "Please, you both must go. Your father would not want you to stay here—not with the Tories growing so strong! It took all my persuasion to make him understand that I could not leave Genevive at a time like this." She rose. "And now I am glad I am here. She will need me in the days to come."

There was a noise behind them, and Genevive stepped into the hallway. She walked as if in a stupor. Her hands hung uselessly at her sides, and her eyes were glazed. Immediately the two women were at her side. She hardly acknowledged their presence. When she reached the stairs, she paused. "We must call the carpenter." Her voice was strained. "Arthur has a wish . . . to see . . . to talk to . . ." She stared ahead, her face working piteously. She bit her upper lip with such force that a small trickle of blood ran down her chin. But she paid no attention to the pain.

Suddenly she drew herself up and descended the steps. Carolyn and Elizabeth followed behind, with George trailing. When they reached the lower entranceway, she stopped again. When she turned and met Carolyn's gaze, her eyes were clear. "He's gone. We were praying the Lord's Prayer together, as we did so often, and . . ." Her resolve faltered momentarily. ". . . he just . . . was gone." She swallowed hard, and then her eyes roamed about the room. "He is gone! Oh, Elizabeth! How will I live without him?"

Elizabeth took the tall woman in her arms and held her until at last the sobs began. Then the two women together moved into the study. Carolyn watched until they closed the door behind them. Then she turned to George. "I can't leave my mother alone here! You must go on by yourself."

George took her arm and led her to a seat. "We will both stay until after the funeral. Then we will go together. Your mother is right. She can handle the house—and no one is going to hurt her—not even the Tories. It is common knowledge that she is the daughter of a baron. The most ardent Tory will forgive her for marrying a rebel. She is too much the lady. What worries me is how it became known that General Fairchild sympathized with the Whigs. He was always careful when he directed the training of the recruits, to work with them far in the fields, where none but understanding eyes could see him. We considered it important to have so influential a man well established in the Tory ranks. We learned much about the plans of General Gage because of his intervention."

Carolyn did not respond. So much had happened—so many of her established concepts had been changed. "Mother said once that General and Mrs. Fairchild were strong supporters of the Crown."

"They probably were—long before you were born. But they love this country—and they are not blind to what has been done to it by the minions of the court. I regret that their Whig sympathies have been discovered. Life will not be easy for Mrs. Fairchild from this point onward."

The burial took place in the family plot, high on a hill above the estate. Red-coated soldiers formed an honor brigade around the general's simple wooden coffin in memory of his long service to the Crown. And they fired a salute with their muskets as the dirt was tossed into the long, deep hole.

The three women stood together, garbed in makeshift black gowns, their faces covered by long veils. As the sound of the muskets faded away, a horse far in the meadow whinnied. Carolyn looked across the field. Suddenly the still body that was the last she

had seen of General Fairchild faded from her memory. Before her, instead, strode the strong, vibrant man who had loved her as she grew from an infant to a child. She remembered how sad he had been when her father had announced his intention to move to Fort Pitt, and then she recalled a time when, as a child of five, she had raced the elderly man across the lawn to a little brook, where she had pointed out a nest.

The two of them had squatted over the small white eggs and she had touched them with a feeling of wonder. In the days that followed, they had visited the nest regularly until the small chicks began to hatch. His words then came back to her now. And suddenly she was filled with a new peace.

"Life does not start and stop as we sometimes think it does." He had taken her hand and put a small chick on his palm. "This chicken carries within its body all the knowledge of the life it will lead. You are yourself, my darling, but you are also a bit of your father—and your mother. And because I love you, you are me, as well—and your grandma Genevive. Everyone you love lives in you. Remember that, and give your love freely. It is the most valuable gift one living creature can offer another."

As the three women began to walk back to the house, she took Genevive's arm. "Grandma, I just remembered something grandpa said. He told me once to enjoy every day with people I loved so that when they were no longer with me I could have happy memories. We have many such memories of grandpa. He made sure of that."

Genevive's face grew calm. "Thank you, child. He told me once that you were a very special girl, and I thought then that I understood. But I know it even better now. It took you to remind me that I still have his love. And will, until I join him in heaven." She

stopped and took Carolyn in her arms. "Thank you, my dear." As she continued down the hill, she began to hum a song that had, in his lifetime, been Arthur Fairchild's favorite tune.

When the sun had at last hidden itself behind the western horizon, Elizabeth called Carolyn and George to her. She was sitting with Genevive on the settee, gazing out over the glistening gardens, fresh from a late-afternoon rain. Carolyn paused before sitting beside them.

Elizabeth took her daughter's hand. "My dear, you have been most helpful in a very difficult time. Sometimes it takes youth to see clearly into the shadows of sunset."

Carolyn lowered her head. "Mother . . ."

Genevive held up her hand. "I have been like a grandmother to you, and now you must listen to me. You are to do as your mother says. There is nothing you can do here except chafe under the discomfort of confinement. God only knows what good you might do closer to Boston. Certainly we all agree that George must leave. And I am determined that you must go with him." She took Carolyn's hands in hers. "God brought you here in time to help me with my sorrow. But your service is complete. Now there is work for you elsewhere."

Elizabeth rose. "You must not resume your deerskin costume, though I realize you have considered doing so. You will do better through the hardships ahead if you travel as"—she paused only a moment —"man and wife. Your father and brother should be in Boston, and I rely on you to bring them news, and to tell them that your grandmother and I are doing well."

Carolyn made no attempt to argue. She and George had already reached a similar decision. Clothed in one

of her mother's simplest dresses, she helped Genevive pack a basket with food. There was no possibility that they would be able to take horses, for they would have to escape the guards by crawling through a hole she and her brother, Roy, had found many years ago in the brick wall that surrounded the estate.

The moon was low on the horizon, and they waited until it set behind the hills. Then Carolyn and George bade her mother and Genevive farewell. They slipped through a cellar window and using the kitchen garden for cover, ran to the brush that circumscribed the grass. When Carolyn found the opening, she wished for a moment that she was still dressed in her brother's deerskin. But then she crawled through the rough brickwork and waited until George stood by her side.

Weary already, though she had not yet begun her journey, she lifted the basket onto her arm and matched her pace with George's stride. The road from New York to Boston was arduous—and long. With the arrival of the Hessian troops, it might also be dangerous. And someplace ahead of her, she hoped to find her father—and her brother. She wondered how they would take the information that she had at last made her choice.

Unconsciously she quickened her pace. She had delayed long enough. If she was to free her mother and her grandmother Genevive, she first would have to find her father.

The road stretched before them in the dimness of the moonless night. If God was watching her, he would know the urgency of her search.

She gazed at the broad shoulders of her companion, and her heart glowed with a new satisfaction. Though she had not said so in simple words, it was clear her mother approved of him as she had never approved of William Jaeger. She could not resist a momentary feeling of disappointment. Were they still back in the mountains, they would be alone when they stopped

to rest. Here, on the highway in the center of the colonies, they would have no privacy. Until they were alone again, she would have to wait to tell George of her new affiliation with the cause of freedom—and her growing love and loyalty to him.

Fifteen

George pulled Carolyn to the side of the road and then with a leap placed himself directly in the path of the oncoming coach. He waved his arms wildly. Carolyn gasped. He was going to be killed!

The driver showed no intention of slowing down. Lashing at his team with his long whip, he swerved around the obstruction and continued on his way. George stood surrounded by a cloud of dust, shaking his fist in the air.

Carolyn exhaled, aware for the first time that she had been holding her breath. Grabbing a branch for support, she waited until he returned to her side.

He was covered with dirt—and sputtering angrily. "Damn! I didn't think it safe to take the coach in the city, but I had not expected such difficulty in stopping it on the road. I fear we will have to walk at least to the next town."

Carolyn pulled out her kerchief and brushed the worst of the dust from his face. "Is your face well known in these parts?"

"Not when it's covered with dirt." He began to pat the dry powder from his clothes. "Yes, I suppose it is. In truth, I have been back often enough to feel as if I still had a home in Boston."

"And do you know people who can be trusted to keep your presence a secret from the soldiers?"

"That I do! There are many strong-hearted liberty-

lovers throughout the land, and they increase the nearer we get to Boston."

"Then we will walk. We cannot risk encountering someone in a coach who might do you harm."

His eyes sparkled. "My, how my little Tory has changed!"

She stamped her foot and turned away from his mocking gaze. "Please, George. That isn't fair. It isn't my fault that . . ."

"No, of course not. I'm sorry. It was just hard to resist. I'll try not to tease you any more." With a final pat that sent dust billowing from his trousers, he took her hand and resumed the journey. "It will be a long trip if we walk the entire way!"

She swung beside him, filled with a new lightheartedness. "Maybe one of your friends will sell us some horses."

He squeezed her hand. "Ah, my dear, you are a wonder. I should have thought of that myself. Come along. I know just the place. And we should be there by sunset."

When they approached the inn, Carolyn drew back. "George . . ."

He tightened his grip and pulled her forward. "Don't fear. The innkeeper has little use for the redcoats, though they might frequent his tavern. He will provide us shelter—and horses—when we take our leave tomorrow."

She felt more at ease when he led the way not to the common entrance, but to the kitchen door. A monster of a man threw the door open and stood watching them approach, his frame filling the open doorway. Suddenly his thick features seemed to brighten. "George! Aye, my lad, I had thought you were feeding the vultures!"

George dropped Carolyn's hand and leaped up the steps, throwing his arms around the burly innkeeper.

For a time the only sound was that of the two men slapping each other's backs, and chuckling gleefully. Then George returned to Carolyn's side and took her hand. "Roger, I wish you to meet my"—he paused for the smallest moment—"wife. We have managed to escape the Tories in New York, and now we are on our way to see what we can do to help the cause in Boston."

Roger beamed at Carolyn and held out a massive hand. Taking her fingers in his, he brought them to his lips. "Ah, madam! I am delighted to see my friend has chosen so lovely a bride!" His thick lips turned up in a grin. "Still, 'tis just like him to expect you to walk! When the cause of freedom is on his mind, he has time for little else."

"Oh, but he has worried about the length of the journey since we began! He is very considerate. . . ."

The two men were laughing again, and Carolyn stopped, aware that she had been the brunt of a joke. When George saw her flushed face, he stopped and put his arm around her shoulders. "I'm sorry, my dear. He meant no harm. It's just that you look so serious. We're safe here. I promise you."

She felt more secure when they left the courtyard and entered the fragrance of the kitchen. They ate surrounded by the odors of roasting beef and fresh-cooked vegetables. And when at last they finished their food, Roger brought them two mugs of foaming ale.

"Here's a toast to the newlyweds! May you live long —and prosper. And may your children be born to freedom!"

Carolyn blushed as she lifted the mug to her lips. If they ever had children. Maybe they, like the Fairchilds, would have no issue.

When the ale was drunk, Roger bowed gracefully. "Madam, sir, I have an excellent room toward the back of the inn, one not known to . . . some of my

other guests. I am sure you will find it much to your liking."

With a flourish George rose, took Carolyn's hand, and led her from the kitchen. They walked like gentry, their arms out before them, her hand resting lightly on his own. And by the time they reached the door to the room, all three were doubled over with laughter.

The door closed firmly behind them, and George paused to throw the bolt. Then his arms were around her and his lips were pressed against hers.

The kiss was not like any they had shared before, for now she no longer hid her love. She clung to his body, felt the nearness and the warmth. And she knew that his desire was as great as her own. When he moved toward the bed, she let herself be led without protest.

He paused beside the four-poster and with a wild swing of his arm, send the spread flying to the floor. His fingers fumbled with the buttons of her bodice, and when she pushed them aside and loosened her own gown, he threw off his shirt and leggings.

They stood for a moment, gazing at each other, and then his hand touched her shoulder. She felt a tremor race through her body. "Oh, George! I love you!"

His fingers traced a line over her breasts and down her gently rounded stomach, and rested on the bush of light hair that crowned her femininity. "I love you, too, Carolyn."

He lifted her then, and placed her on the bed. Her eyes caressed his forehead, his nose, his lips. She gazed long at his broad, manly chest and the beauty of his male parts, crowned with a halo of dark hair. Then she held out her arms. "Come to me."

A tingling began when his legs touched hers, and she buried her face in his chest. "Will you ever forgive me?"

He tilted her head so that she looked directly into his eyes. "Whatever for?"

"For misjudging you. For scorning the cause of liberty. I was so confused."

He nuzzled against her ear, kissing the curve of her neck. "Don't speak of that again. You are mine now. We will not be any more married after a pastor says his words and blesses our union. You're my wife. My partner. As your mother is to your father. Only maybe more so. We will have no disagreements regarding the rearing of our children."

Again the fear returned. He had taken her before —and she had not conceived. Then he kissed her lips, and her worry faded. Now was not the time to concern herself with such matters.

He was moving now, running his tongue down her neck to her breasts. It burned into her consciousness like a brand, setting her body afire. She gasped and pulled him close. "Now. Take me now!"

He seemed not to hear her words. His tongue touched her every part, lit the flame of passion in her groin, set her heart pounding, sent a tingling that raced up and down her legs and arms like small needles.

When he entered it was slowly, as if he were loathe to hurry past any moment of enjoyment. Once, when she pushed upward to hurry their union, he drew back, only to renew his tantalizing journey at his own tempo when she lay back on the bed.

Now she felt the pressure of his body against hers, and she began to rotate her hips without any awareness of her action. In response he raised his body to allow her room to move. She faltered then, suddenly self-conscious, and he teased her desire with a gentle lunge.

Overcome by a sudden lust, she strained against him, sharing now the pleasure of movement, the rhythm of entry and retreat. Was it her voice or his that cried out in rapture? She could not tell. Did he kiss her neck again, or was it her own fingers that stroked her body? She did not know. Her mind was spinning, the

room was no longer real. She heard labored breathing, and realized suddenly that she was gasping for breath.

Then, once more, she knew only his nearness, his presence within her, the movement of their bodies as they strained together. The explosion began, tearing through her body, robbing her of any recognition of reality. It was like a surging river flowing between her body and his. He pressed against her, and they blended, merged, were one at last—and forever.

The horses were saddled and ready when Carolyn and George stepped into the courtyard. The sky was barely light, and from the snores that issued from the windows above the common room, she surmised that the soldiers were still sleeping off their night of carousing.

They led their mounts in a slow walk through the meadow behind the inn, circling wide before they returned to the road. Once on the firm-packed dirt, George spurred his horse. Carolyn followed quickly behind him. A long journey lay ahead, and she was feeling an increased awareness of his impatience.

When they were far from the inn, George slowed his beast to a walk, and at that more leisurely pace continued throughout the day. They spoke little and stopped only to rest and relieve themselves in the woods. It was far past sunset when they at last turned into a farmyard and silently dismounted.

They were on their way before dawn, pointing their horses toward the dark valleys of the Berkshires. From that point on they camped at night in the woods. Once they shared a fire with a contingent of men who seemed to treat her with unusual respect when they heard her name, and who told of adventures they had had while running contraband into Boston. They knew her father —and her mother. And they showed honest regret when she told them that General Fairchild had died.

The leader of the band treated his escapades more

like games than serious encounters. He laughed uproariously as he recounted a hunt in which he had played the fox to the redcoats' hounds. "Damn Hessians thought only of laying their hands on me! Paid no attention to the wares that lay hidden almost beneath their noses! By the time they had chased me into the woods and lost me—and themselves—the townsfolk had secreted every barrel and bale. Everything arrived safely in Boston that night. Fools! I wonder only that we do not fight them now, before they get more reinforcements from England."

George and Carolyn joined in the general laughter. But after they were rolled in their blankets, George kissed her on the ear. "Nathan is a brave man—but not always a wise one. Bravado stirs the spirit and encourages the fighters, but we need more than such superficial comfort. We need men of steady courage and relentless devotion to liberty if we are to win in the conflict that lies ahead. This is not a game—to be played by men who act like boys."

Carolyn snuggled into his arms. "But the Green Mountain Boys seem most courageous. Who knows but that they will be of great help to the cause."

"They had little enough to say about Boston! Their only concern seems with daring adventures!" George pulled her close. "Yet maybe you are right. A horse stung by hundreds of flies will go wild and throw his rider."

With a vision of the men she had met buzzing around the head of a noble horse like angry flies, she dropped off to sleep. And her dreams were filled with the threat of impending battle.

They arrived in Concord after a hard ride that had continued far into the night. George drew his mount to a halt on a hill overlooking the town. He pointed to a house at one corner of the green. "There is the home of the Reverend Jonas Clark, where Sam Adams

and John Hancock are said to be hiding. Look! There are men guarding its doors."

She followed his finger and in the darkness made out a silent form lounging on the steps of a handsome cottage. As she watched, a man with a musket appeared on the green and strode toward the guard. They stood together for a time, and then the first man gave a rough salute and wandered across the common to another house, which he entered.

Carolyn studied the wide green, looking for other men, and at last she located them, lined neatly before the meetinghouse. They seemed to move slowly, as if they were half-asleep.

George took her arm. "Over there! The redcoats are coming!"

She looked where he pointed. Far in the distance a faint cloud of dust obscured the road. "Are you sure? Couldn't it just be a horseman?"

"Look how much of the road is covered. And there, closer to us. See the solitary horseman? That must be Paul Revere! Hurry! We must join the men before the fighting begins!"

He led the way down the hill past the neat white cottages and onto the common. Carolyn cast a glance at the bridge over which the rider—and the army that followed in his wake—would come. Then the road was lost to her sight and they were entering a barn on the edge of town.

A young boy met them at the gate and took the reins of their horses when they dismounted. George greeted him warmly and without looking back at Carolyn, strode onto the commons. Carolyn lifted her skirts and ran behind him.

He paused at the end of one line of men who stood with their muskets over their shoulders and their eyes focused on someone who was standing on the steps of the meetinghouse. The man beside him turned.

"George! George Nelson! Look, men! We've a new recruit!"

The leader stepped down and hurried to where George and Carolyn had stopped. "George, my lad! I wondered if you'd have the strength to stay away from a good fight. They're coming, you know."

"Yes. We saw them from the top of the hill."

A horse thundered over the green and Paul Revere swung to the ground. "They routed the defense at Lexington. But we can lick them! There isn't a man here who hasn't more spunk than the whole lot of redcoats!"

Carolyn smiled. Evidently the Green Mountain Boys were not the only men with bravado.

"Haloo!" The leader was staring into her face. "You surely can't be planning to have a woman join in the fighting?" He looked reproachfully toward George. "See the cottage at the corner of the green? My Mary sits at the window, praying for our success. She'll be too worried to sleep this night. Mayhap she could use some companionship."

Carolyn shook her head. "No. I can fire a gun, too. Let me stay!"

George took her by the elbow. "My dear, you have no gun, and none of these men can give you his. Please—I will fight with more courage if I know you are safe."

"But . . . I want to be with you. It isn't fair. Surely I have proven myself capable. . . ."

He pulled her close and closed her mouth with his lips. "Please, my darling. I'll return." He pushed her away and turned her toward Mary Haskell's house. "Pray for us. We will need God's intervention."

She shuddered. The line of British soldiers had been long. And the men on the green were few—and poorly trained.

His voice was gentle. "Please, Carolyn. Go."

Clenching her jaw to hold back her protest, she

stumbled through the grass. But when she reached the house she turned. George and the other men were not watching her. Silently she slipped into a shadow at the side of the building. As long as she was outside, she might be of some help.

The wait seemed interminable. Anxiously she looked at the clock in the center of the meetinghouse tower. Almost four! The battle would go poorly if it was fought in daylight! Once more she looked at the pitiful line of men, and her heart beat faster. There were more than before! Maybe they would succeed after all!

Suddenly a clanking noise drew her attention to the hills north of the town. A narrow road leading into the center of town was filled with redcoats! She screamed once, and then the firing began.

At first she thought for certain that all the men—including George—had been killed. Then she realized that they had dispersed at her cry, and were running for cover. The officer of the British troops was in command of the green. She could hear him shouting orders. A party of two hundred men was dispatched to take the bridge. Others were sent to search for and destroy any stores of munitions that could be found, and to do away with any other stores that lay hidden in the village.

The men began to detach themselves from the main body of the army when a loud report from the bridge drew her attention. The provincial army, eager to keep the bridge, had opened fire.

Carolyn pressed into the shadows. She had been wrong. She should have done as George requested! Now she was in mortal danger—and she had no weapon with which to defend herself.

A shout from the commanding officer of the British forces called the searchers back. The bridge now was their only means of escape from the town. If it was taken, they might not live to see their reinforcements.

Carolyn waited until the men who had begun to

scour the village were engaged in battle with the others. Then, gaining courage, she crept closer to the fighting. Captain Davis fell before her eyes, and she smothered a cry of alarm. They would all be killed! But the provincials seemed to vanish into the trees, and though they continued firing, they made poor targets for the soldiers who, crowded together, made themselves only more visible to their enemies.

The sound of gunfire rang in Carolyn's ears long after the fighting ended. Dazed, she sought shelter once more in the shadows as the British soldiers re-formed their ranks in the center of the common and slowly began their march out of town. They had succeeded, while the battle was its fiercest, in firing some of the stores, and as the last man moved toward the bridge the sky was lit by a great flash of light, and a sound like the roar of a thousand cannons shook the air. The munitions had been destroyed.

A shout of anger rose on the hill across the river, where the provincials had taken shelter. Carolyn gazed about her in despair. It was hopeless! All was lost!

As the last soldier crossed the bridge, she was galvanized into action. She paused for a moment on the green to pick up a musket that had fallen from the hands of a victim of the first barrage of gunfire. Then she was across the bridge, pausing beside each body to look into its face. If George was injured, she would have to find him and give him aid. If he was not, she wanted to be close to his side. Silently she vowed that once she found him, she would never leave him again.

Sixteen

Carolyn shifted her musket and crouched behind a large bush. Someone was coming. Below her, and as far as she could see, the British soldiers filled the road, marching in as orderly a fashion as was possible under the irregular fire of the provincials.

Of only one thing was Carolyn certain. George did not lie among the dead and injured around the bridge or on the green common of Concord. He, with the other men who had survived the catastrophe, was racing through the wooded hills above the road, picking off the retreating redcoats with carefully directed shots.

She crouched lower, hidden in a pocket of mist and undergrowth, while three men dressed in dark homespun breeches and loose white shirts with flowing sleeves stamped past. Then cautiously she crept from her hiding place and scurried after them.

A cry from the road drew her attention. One of the rebels' bullets had hit its mark. She watched as two of the soldiers broke ranks and bent to lift their comrade and drag him between them after the retreating army. She could see others now. An officer lay face down over his saddle. A soldier limped in place, his rifle serving as a crutch. And a wagon in which munitions had been carried now served as a cart for carrying the dead from the battlefield.

She closed her eyes to wipe the vision of the suffering from her mind. She had not dared to stop the Minutemen to ask about George, for they were all too silent

—too intent upon their pursuit. But the sky was at last growing bright. She would be able to begin her search for George without bothering others for assistance.

She paused at the top of a small rise. Below her, across a wide plain, lay the city of Boston, backlit by the rising sun. She gazed at it with a feeling of excitement. Boston! The largest, most prosperous city of the entire colonies. The center of commerce, and the seat of the colonial government.

She realized the firing was increasing, and when she glanced down at the retreating British soldiers, she saw that they were running wildly toward the protection of the port. What had begun as a defeat for the provincial fighters had turned into victory.

Suddenly a loud shout went up from the ranks of the redcoats. A battalion of fresh soldiers appeared at the edge of the city and quickly spread behind the fleeing troops. There was a short burst of fire, and then the shooting ceased. The provincials, content with chasing the overwhelming force of British soldiers back to the protection of General Gage himself, were settling down to lay siege to the city.

Carolyn pulled out her kerchief and wiped the dust from her face. She had never felt so exhausted—so drained of all energy. For one moment she allowed herself to rest. Then, with her jaw set in determination, she began her hunt.

She knew the hills around Boston more from hearsay than from experience, though once, when she was small, her father had spent a time attached to the force that served the governor. There was Breed's Hill, the small rise on which she stood. And Bunker Hill, to the north. She searched the small campsites one by one. Most of the men ignored her presence, but every once in a while she realized that she was being followed by a man who had not found the battle totally exhausting.

One burly fellow tried to grab her as she approached the base of Bunker Hill, but she turned and laid the flat of her hand across his cheek. Startled, he rubbed the stinging flesh. "My apologies, mistress! I did not expect a decent woman in the camp!"

"Then be more alert!" Her voice reflected her anger. "I have no wish to engage in a small war of my own!"

He laughed heartily. "I am sincere in my regret that I offended you. What is it that sends you into this rough company?"

She told him of her search for George, and he smiled knowingly. "Come with me. I'll bring you to the captain."

Her progress under escort was far easier than it had been when she went alone. She reached the captain swiftly and waited until he turned in her direction. "Sir!" Her hefty companion saluted smartly. "This young woman is searching for a George Nelson. I told her you might be able to assist her."

The captain stared at Carolyn in silence. Then suddenly a smile lit his face. "George Nelson is on his way to the members of the Continental Congress who are reconvening to ask for aid in our siege. Is he the only man who will serve your wishes?"

Carolyn's body tensed. "Sirrah! Do you make it a practice to insult helpless women?"

Her companion rubbed his cheek. "Sir, she is far from helpless, despite her protests. I have felt the strength of her arm."

The captain's face grew solemn. "My apologies, mistress. I regret that I cannot deliver you immediately to your George Nelson. But I am certain he will return within the week. You are welcome to stay in that house yonder until he arrives." He gestured toward the foot of the hill, where a small cottage lay sheltered by a clump of trees. "Captain Marshall Margason at your service." His salute was smart.

She held out her hand. "Carolyn Salford. Thank

you for your consideration. Will I need an introduction to my host?"

He was smiling broadly. "None that your name will not provide! Had I known you were Robert Salford's daughter . . ."

"I forgive you. I suppose it is not surprising that you should have thought the worst of me. I see no other woman in the ranks of your soldiers."

"None who carry rifles! Nor any who demand respect! Well, welcome to you, anyway. I hope your wait will not be too long."

Carolyn curtseyed, shifted her rifle to her other shoulder, and descended the hill. Her first anger at hearing that George was gone dissipated quickly. He had no reason to think she would follow him! He would be certain that she awaited his return with Mary Haskell, in the cottage on the edge of the Concord green.

Maybe she should have done just that! Quickly she brushed the thought from her mind. She would have gone mad waiting in ignorance for him to return!

Captain Margason turned toward a soldier and began to speak with him. Turning, Carolyn descended the hill and knocked on the cottage door.

Her hostess was a tiny woman, even smaller than herself, with a wrinkled face and deep blue eyes that sparkled with interest in the world about her. She bustled about, settling Carolyn in a small room near the back of the cottage, and then sat down in a rocking chair while her new guest scrubbed the worst of the road dirt from her face and hands.

"Mistress Burke"—Carolyn paused in her ablutions and looked up at her hostess—"do you not fear being so close to the fighting?"

The wiry woman crackled merrily. "The name, my dear, is Widow Burke. And why should I be afraid? The worst that can happen is that I be killed in the crossfire—if there is any. I have no reason to live other

than to be of use to the cause. My man was killed in the massacre of '70, over five years past. I cannot weep at the thought of joining him in heaven."

Carolyn was silent for a moment. "You have any children?"

"Aye, six sons and five daughters. All staunch defenders of the right to liberty and independence. When the yoke of oppression is thrown from our shoulders, a Burke will be party to the great liberation."

They ate together in the small kitchen, watching the fire crackle in the hearth. Widow Burke entertained Carolyn with a description of her twenty-odd grandchildren, and with a detailed account of the Thanksgiving feast past, when the entire clan had gathered in a small cottage for a reunion.

Carolyn gave only minimal attention to the tale. She could not keep the names separated—nor did she really care to try to remember them all. When at last Widow Burke paused for a breath, she rose. "I think I would enjoy a short walk. The air is so balmy, and I enjoy the colors of the sky as the day draws to a close."

The widow cackled. "Aye, I've been told I cannot be silenced, and that my constant talking wearies the ear. I suggest that you maintain some distance between you and the campsites. Unless you wish to spend all your time rebuffing the advances of men who have already begun to think like soldiers!"

Carolyn smiled. "I have already met some such. Thank you. I'll take your advice and keep to the trees. It is fresh air I want, not male companionship."

Her anticipation of the beauty of the sunset had not been excessive. The sky was ablaze with reds and oranges, with a touch of pure gold shining around the edges of the clouds. The deep turquoise of the arch above her deepened as the sun settled closer to the horizon. A feeling of peace wiped all of her earlier worries from her mind. Moving from the woods that

obscured her vision of the heavenly display, she settled on a rock and leaning back on a raised ledge, abandoned herself to her pleasure.

The clouds shifted, changing color as they moved. The gold that had begun as a trim took over from the orange, and finally the sky was streaked with bands of gold and deep blue.

When the dark purples began to obliterate the gold, she rose and turned back toward the cottage. Maybe she had been unkind to leave the widow alone.

Suddenly the path before her was filled with redcoats. She looked about in alarm and then, without clearly thinking through what she should do, she began to run.

Her way was blocked by a tall soldier. "Come now, miss! Where can so pretty a female be running on so lovely a night?"

She stared at her captor, panic stopping her call for help. "Let me go!" She had regained her voice. Immediately she cried out. "Help! Help me, please!"

The soldier clamped his hand over her mouth. "Quiet, woman! What difference is it to you what men you embrace?"

She stared at him in horror. Then she bit his hand and pulled free of his arm. "How dare you! I am not a whore! My father is Colonel Salford! I'll have your head for such rudeness!"

The men who had moments before seemed ready to rape her now drew back. Her captor cleared his throat nervously. Quickly his expression changed again, and he gazed at her with a sly look. "If you're the colonel's daughter, what are you doing so near the rebel camp? We saw you leave the Widow Burke's garden."

She drew herself up and gazed at him with her most haughty expression. "Mind your manners, soldier! Who are you to question a colonel's daughter?"

The soldiers muttered together, and at last one of

them took her arm. "Maybe you're telling us the truth. We can't say. But there is one man who will know if you lie. Come along, woman. The lieutenant can settle this matter!"

She felt her heart begin to pound. There was only one lieutenant in Boston who would know her! And if she was brought to him, she would find it difficult to escape.

But there was no opportunity to break free as she was led toward the darkened city. Above her the sky had turned black, and as if lit by a giant hand, the stars began to glitter. The city seemed a reflection of the dome above, for in the darkness the street lamps sparkled dimly, flickering in the breeze.

She tried once to break free of the soldier's grip, and felt it tighten around her wrist. At last, resigned to put up with her temporary imprisonment, she let herself be escorted into town.

The fingers relaxed as she was pushed into a bright room, and she pulled herself loose. She walked proudly, determined not to show the fear that filled her breast.

"Carolyn! Thank God you are safe!" He was beside her, his tall frame dwarfing her, shielding her from the threat of the rough soldiers. He gazed into her wide eyes, and then, with an unexpected impulsiveness, pulled her into his arms. "Carolyn, what has happened? What are you doing here? I thought you would be waiting for me in New York?"

She recoiled inwardly as William Jaeger pressed his lips against hers. Then she was released again, and she stood silently facing him.

How could she have thought he was handsome? His nose, like the beak of a bird, curved down over his lips. His chin was sharp and thin. But what startled her most were his eyes. They had seemed so deep and loving long ago when she had decided he was the one she wished to marry. Now they were deep still, but the depth held only ice—and accusation.

"I went to New York and my father was gone. General Fairchild died." She did not need to try to act confused. Suddenly she remembered the sadness of her grandfather's passing. "I decided to come and search for my father and brother. Are they not here?"

The suspicion faded. "Forgive me, Carolyn. It was such a surprise. I never expected you to arrive in the wake of the rebel assault." He glanced up at the soldiers and dismissed them with a word. Then he drew her onto a settee. "My darling, you have been in grave danger! Do you even realize what has occurred these last days?"

For one moment Carolyn considered taunting him with the cowardliness of the army, but something in his look dissuaded her. The accusative sharpness was gone, and she felt him caress her with a gentle glance. She blushed and lowered her eyes. "No, William. I only now saw men camped around the city, and I will confess I wondered what their intention might be. But they caused me no harm, and one of them even directed me to the cottage where I planned to stay the night."

"But you should have come directly into the city! You are not safe among the provincials!"

She withdrew her hand from his grasp. Why was it that she did not trust his words? He seemed almost to be gloating at her presence! "They treated me well enough. My father is known throughout the colonies."

He lifted her hand in his again, and this time she dared not pull away. "Carolyn, have you spoken with your father lately—about the rioting and the rebellion? Before you left the fort?"

Carolyn shook her head. "My father spoke very little about such things to me—or to my mother."

A strange smile lit his face and he stared at her in silence. When he finally spoke, it was with a new certainty in his voice. "Come with me. You must meet the general."

"General Gage?" In spite of herself, she felt a tremor of fear—and excitement.

"Yes. And please, speak not about what has happened. He is a very busy man, concerned with the movements of armies and the control of rebellious colonies. Nevertheless I want him to be aware of your presence in Boston."

Carolyn nodded. She took William's arm and walked in silence through the large room. The house had been at one time a magnificent residence, but the furniture had to a great extent been removed, leaving large, bare rooms and carpetless floors. She wondered idly whether this mansion might have been the home of one of the provincial leaders—maybe Sam Adams or John Hancock. Then, with a blush of embarrassment, she realized that the colonel—and governor of the colonies—had been in residence in Boston for some years. This would, of course, be his military offices—appropriated many years ago.

Still, the austerity that surrounded her filled her with a strange uneasiness. She tightened her hold on William's arm, and felt a responsive hardening of his muscles. When they reached the double doors, he patted her hand and peeled it from his forearm. "My dear, wait here a moment." He met her troubled glance. "You'll be all right, trust me. And I'll be back in a moment."

The two young guards at the doors pulled them open as William approached. And then she was alone. She stood nervously facing the two soldiers, and then, uneasy under their steady gaze, she turned and studied the great hallway.

Soldiers walked through the open hall in twos and threes, and occasionally a newcomer would push open the great front doors and join the others. She realized now that upon her arrival she had been brought to a small anteroom which, she concluded, was William's office. He was not a line officer, as she had romanti-

cally assumed him to be, but an aide to the general. She smiled wryly. More than once she had heard the soldiers at the fort voice their disdain for deskwork.

There was a noise behind her and William was at her side. "Come, my dear. Now remember. Do not let him draw you into long conversation. Give him short, precise answers. He is a busy man."

She nodded. William took her hand and put it back on his arm and then, clearing his throat, he turned and headed for the double doors which, as before, were opened as he approached.

Once inside he paused, and the doors closed behind him. "Governor, may I present my fiancée, Carolyn Salford, Colonel Salford's daughter."

General-Governor Gage resembled in many ways the young officer who stood by Carolyn's side. Tall and thin, he had the look of an aristocrat accustomed to authority. He swung around his desk with a briskness that spoke well for his physical condition and took her hand, bringing it to his lips.

"My dear! You cannot know how pleased we are to have you safe! I have worried much about your welfare in these past days."

She glanced quickly at William, who shook his head very gently. "Thank you, General. I am honored!"

There was a tap on the door. With a grimace of annoyance, General Gage returned to his desk. "Enter."

A young soldier stepped through the doorway. "Sir."

"Speak! I have little time for guessing games."

"Sir." The youth looked at Carolyn.

General Gage met William's eyes. Then he turned to Carolyn. "Please forgive me, my child, but my men are not comfortable delivering military information with a woman in the room. One would think they were preparing for some ribald revelry."

Carolyn curtseyed. "I understand, General. If you will excuse me." When he bowed in response, she

once more took William's arm and walked beside him from the room.

When they were back in his office, she confronted him. "William, I cannot believe you are not aware of my father's . . ."

He held up his hand. "My dearest, before you say more, you must listen to what I have to tell you."

She tightened her jaw. Already she was growing to actively dislike this man to whom she had almost become engaged.

"You were going to inform me that your father is not any longer under the command of the general—right?"

She felt an alarm all out of proportion to his words. "Yes." Her voice trailed off. He was staring at her with a new intensity.

"Well, then, you will be delighted to know that your information is incorrect. Your father is as loyal a subject as the governor himself. I am disappointed only at one aspect of the situation. He had been instructed never to let anyone know he supported the Crown—not even his own family!"

Carolyn stared at William with a growing horror. "What do you mean? What are you saying?"

"I am telling you that your father was given the assignment at Fort Pitt because we realized that in the frontier lands the rebel sentiments were fostered. He was to let them believe he was aligned with them. He was to do whatever was necessary to gain the confidence of the leaders of the revolt."

She stared at him in confusion. "But my mother . . ."

"Your mother was not privy to the agreement. Nor could she be. What rebel would believe a soldier of the Crown whose wife showed no worry about his seeming change of loyalty?"

"But . . ."

William took her hand and gazed into her eyes. "Tell me, what led you to seek the protection of the

British Army? Did your father speak to you? Was it he who told you that you would be safe here?"

"I—" If she told him the truth, would he treat her differently? "I did not seek them out. They captured me, while I was resting near the Widow Burke's." She stopped short. Had she now put that good woman in jeopardy?

"Then your father said nothing to you?"

"No. But my mother . . ."

"Your mother raised you to be a lady in England, did she not? You were taught to expect that you would some day return to her homeland. Have you never questioned why?"

"Yes. Of course. I spoke to mother . . ."

"And she said it was her wish. She was right. But did she not also say your father objected?" He paused until Carolyn nodded. "Well, then, can you not see? He was acting the part of a man whose sympathies were turning slowly toward rebellion! But it was, I assure you, all an act. You will see when he returns. He had our consent to enlighten your brother, if he deemed it wise. Obviously he has done so. Be patient, my dear. They will be here shortly, and your confusion will be ended."

"But General Fairchild! I . . ."

She lowered her eyes under the intensity of his glance. "General Fairchild? How is the man? He, too, has served us well in like duty."

Carolyn buried her face in her hands. It was all too upsetting! Were both her father and General Fairchild spies? "General Fairchild is dead." Her voice reflected the leaden weight that enclosed her chest.

"Dead? How did he die?"

"Of old age—or of some debilitating illness that ate his body. He was skin and bones, and weak as a baby." A tear crept down her cheek. "He was like a grandfather to me."

"I know, my dear. Take comfort in the knowledge

that he died like a soldier—in the line of duty. I must tell the governor—when next I see him. He will be sorrowed by the news."

Carolyn swayed and grasped at the corner of a chair. This was all too much. First she was told that her father was a spy, and now she was to believe that General Fairchild, that kindly, quiet old man, was one as well?

William's arms supported her shoulders. "Please, you have been through a great deal today. Let me take you home."

He guided her through the hallway and out onto the street. There he hailed a hansom and assisted her into its interior. With a word to the driver, he swung in beside her.

They rode in silence through the streets. Though it had been years since Carolyn had visited Boston, she was horrified at the changes she saw around her. Stores that had been filled with customers now stood empty and abandoned. There were few people on the roadways, and most showed signs of the long embargo. Their clothes were shabby and their faces gaunt.

She closed her eyes. Her own inner confusion made the sight doubly difficult to endure. Should her sympathies be with the man who sat beside her? Would her father be angered if he learned that she had even temporarily aligned herself with George? With the cause of the rebels?

William touched her hand. "We are here. Come. I will show you to your room. Fortunately I have a home that is appropriate for your presence."

He led her into a building which, though far less magnificent than the one she had first seen, was still well built and clearly well furnished. She did not bother to ask him whether it was one appropriated after the start of the blockade, though she wondered. She wanted nothing but to be alone.

They ascended the steps, and at the top she was greeted by a mousey woman who took her arm and escorted her into a moderately-sized bedchamber that contained, besides the bed, an ample wardrobe, a chest of drawers, a chaise, and a chair. A small table with a drawer in front stood beside the chair.

William lifted her hand to his lips. "I will call on you in the morning. Boston, for all its blockade, is not as austere as you might expect."

Carolyn nodded, and entered her room. She knew she should be angry with George. Despite his protests of love he was, after all, little better than Lemelle, for he had taken advantage of her ignorance. Then she remembered that he, too, was being deceived. By her own father!

She brushed the thought from her mind. Her father, whatever he did, was above reproach! It was George who deserved her ire. But when she searched her heart for appropriate anger, she found only hurt—and intense loneliness.

She brushed her memories of his kindness away with a sudden impatience. She had been put upon, that was the truth. But surely this was not the first case of such mistreatment. Men were like that. They took advantage of women who were not strong in their resistance. If they were not the kind to use force, as Lemelle had done, then they utilized subtle deceits. That had been George's path. She had every reason to hate him for what he had done.

Her thoughts filled her mind during her bath and throughout her preparation for bed. The maid who had taken charge of her welfare introduced herself as Lucy, and then lapsed into silence to match that of her new mistress. Carolyn was hardly aware that she was being served. And when Lucy bade her good-night, she murmured her response. The darkness was welcome. Maybe when morning came she would be able

to face the dichotomies that life now presented for her understanding.

She awoke with the first light and lay trying to collect her thoughts. Only when she recalled the entire confusion of the evening past did she rise, ring for Lucy, and prepare to face the day. When she was dressed, she stepped to the window and gazed out across the street.

Made mostly of wood, the houses were large and for the most part well kept. Fresh paint covered the walls, and the neat wooden platforms that protected each doorway from the mud were swept clean. A carriage rumbled past, tossing dirt onto the few men who moved through the street. A short distance down the road she could see a printer's establishment, but though she studied it carefully, she could see no sign of activity within.

Her parents had spoken of Boston many times. It was unique among the towns of the colonies, for it was, from the very first, built on trade. Now the life's blood of the city was cut off, nipped by General Gage and his men. And the city was dying. Some of the men she had seen fall at Concord came from these empty shops.

She drew back, shaking her head. Maybe they deserved the hardships that lay ahead! She had accepted George's claim that the taxes and other laws were unfair. But maybe it was just the opposite, as she had believed all along. Maybe the merchants of Boston were just too greedy. After all, who would deny the king's right to impose taxes on trade? Didn't the merchants realize that the tax money, besides supporting the Crown (as well it should), also served to supply the large navy that protected their trading vessels?

There was a tap on her door and Lucy rushed to open it. William Jaeger entered. "My dear, come. Let me show you some of the beauties of Boston!"

She swept across the room, aware for the first time in weeks that her gown was totally inadequate. "Are there any seamstresses nearby? I—"

He took her hand. " 'Tis to one that I plan to go —immediately. My future bride must dress in appropriate costume." He glanced toward the maid, who hovered in the background. "Is Lucy satisfactory? We can bring another woman in to care for your hair—and for your new clothes when we acquire them. Oh, Carolyn, I cannot tell you how happy I am to have you, at last, at my side!"

Carolyn tried to return his smile, but her attempt was feeble. Yet William seemed not in the least distressed. He took her hand, smiled again, and led her down the stairs. As he assisted her into the carriage, she forced a more convincing light into her eyes. And he met her glance with a look of satisfaction.

As they rode through the street, she thought again on his words of the night before. It all seemed so logical! Yet she could not reconcile herself to the thought that her father was a spy. He was too forthright a man for such deception!

Yet, spy he was—unless she was to give the lie to both William and General Gage. And if all she had now learned was true, she had a need to wipe the memory of George Nelson—and the love they had shared—from her heart.

Seventeen

Marybelle Jones, the little seamstress whose shop occupied the back end of a large, austere wooden building, rose from her sewing as William and Carolyn entered.

"Good day to you, Lieutenant Jaeger." She paused and looked expectantly toward Carolyn.

"This is my fiancée, Carolyn Salford. Carolyn, my dear, this is Mistress Marybelle Jones. Her skill with the needle and scissors equals that of the best tailor in London."

Marybelle smiled self-consciously. "You flatter me, sir. I only do my best."

William turned to Carolyn. "When we get back to the house, I must show you a vest she made for me. Exquisite! Don't let her modesty deceive you." He settled himself in a deep lounge chair that was the sole occupant of the viewing room. "Bring your best out, mistress. Miss Salford must be attired as befits her station. Her grandfather was a baron, and when she returns to England, she will come into a considerable inheritance.

Carolyn blushed. Why did he have to speak of that? She cast an annoyed glance at William, but he was gazing idly at the lace on his wrists. She wished suddenly that he had worn his uniform instead of the foppish outfit he seemed to prefer. Somehow he seemed less of a noble figure without the brilliant red of his

jacket and the sharp-pointed hat that marked him as a king's man.

He brought a pinch of snuff to his nose and sneezed quietly. Even that brought a flush of irritation to her cheeks. Why couldn't he sneeze with verve, like . . . other men . . . did?

Marybelle parted the curtains and emerged with an armload of materials that made Carolyn forget her irritation. There was a delicate green linen, an exquisite Chinese pongee, a clear white pique, and. . . . Carolyn lost herself in the beauty of the cloth.

Her first instinct was to let William make all the decisions, but as she gazed at the selection, she realized she had definite preferences. Without seeking his aid, she chose five pieces: the pongee, the green linen, one of the many white piques, a deep maroon silk, and a yellow cotton that was so finely woven that it looked and felt like silk.

When she had made her choices, she stepped back to look at the display. William spoke quietly. "Excellent, my dear! I could not have chosen better myself! You have inherited your mother's natural taste!"

He rose and lifted her hand to his lips, but he did not bother to actually kiss it. "I want you to have the very best! If it takes my entire salary, you must arrive in London properly attired."

She looked at him in alarm. He had said nothing about London before! "Are we—are you going to London?"

"Not right away, unfortunately, but as soon as possible. You don't belong in the middle of this kind of rowdyism. You should be at the court, with every man you meet admiring your beauty."

She had heard words to that effect before, and they had brought her only trouble. Marybelle took up a tape and began to measure Carolyn's shoulders.

William settled down again, took another pinch of

snuff, and stared fixedly at the ceiling. "Didn't I see some brocade in here the other day?"

Marybelle's hand twitched, and she almost pricked Carolyn with a pin. "Yes, sir, you did. But it was brought in specifically for Captain Dunsmore's wife."

"That old hag? You're wasting that superb brocade on that witch?"

"Please, William!" Carolyn suddenly felt uneasy.

"I'm sorry, sir. The material belongs to the captain. I only do what I am told."

He snorted. "Yes, of course! Well, then, have you any other material? I am understandably proud of Mistress Carolyn. I want her to be the most beautifully gowned woman at the officers' ball next week. Have you any material that hasn't already been used for some hag's costume?"

Miss Jones curtseyed. "Your pardon, sir. I do believe I have one piece that might delight you." She put down her tape and pins and scurried from the room.

Carolyn turned to William. "Please, you embarrass me! I don't have to dress better than the captain's wife! I'm not used to . . ."

"But you must get used to being catered to! You must forget that you have spent years living in the backwoods, forget the difficulties you have passed through! Remember only that you are a baroness, that you are to be very wealthy, and that your life from now on will be very different from what it was in the past."

He rose and began to pace back and forth. "Boston is a far more busy place than you might believe, even now, with the embargo in effect. We have an aristocracy here, too, as well as in London. And you must take your rightful place in our society. Just because your mother has chosen to abandon her heritage does not mean you must do so, too! If I recall, she went to some

lengths to make it easy for you to return to your proper place."

Carolyn nodded. She was growing confused again, and she looked about her for some reality that would save her. She picked up a corner of the pongee and felt it.

William continued, as if he had not noticed her upset. "Our lives here have not changed appreciably since the start of the blockade. Oh, I don't deny there are some small inconveniences. We must bring materials in on troopships, and sometimes they don't arrive for months. But General Gage is not intent upon making our lives unpleasant. He wants only to punish the rebels. He does what he can to help us keep our spirits up."

Carolyn was silent. She had seen the common folk on the street as she rode from her residence to the ship. They seemed a lean, somber lot, and she remembered that one of the rebel soldiers had complained that many were starving in the city because of the difficulty of obtaining food—and its exorbitant price.

She wiped the memory from her consciousness. The rebels had asked for their troubles! And now their very own men were closing the trap. The siege, if it succeeded in blocking overland shipping, would strangle Boston—at least colonial Boston—to death.

"Will the siege cause the army any troubles?"

William's eyes widened. "Siege? You consider that smattering of impoverished backwoodsmen capable of carrying on a siege? Oh, my dear girl! You do worry unnecessarily! They'll be home in a day. They have their lands and their swine to care for. You watch. One by one they will slip away and return to the rustic life. It takes seasoned, experienced soldiers to carry on a successful siege."

"Then General Gage does not plan to engage them in battle?"

"Not immediately, at least. To fight them now might

serve only to draw them closer together. No, let them stew a while. Let them begin to worry about their wives and children. Let them think of the furrows that need hoeing. Then, when they have fallen apart, we will crush them—like ants under a heel!" He looked at her sharply. "Why do you worry? You don't still feel concern for the traitors, do you?"

She flushed. She had been thinking of George. "I don't want you to be . . . hurt. Now that we're together, I am concerned for your safety."

He rose again and drew her momentarily into his arms. "My dear little girl, there is no danger of such an encounter ever taking place! When you have some proper clothes, so you can move freely about the city, I will take you to a tower from which you will be able to see the outskirts of Boston. You will see for yourself the disintegration of their ranks."

Marybelle Jones cleared her throat and stepped through the drapes. In her arm lay a bolt of cloth the likes of which Carolyn had never seen. It sparkled like a million tiny stars as the seamstress moved toward her, and when it was draped over her shoulder, it glistened.

William paused and eyed Carolyn thoughtfully. "Miss Jones, you have at last produced a material worthy of a lady. Has any of this yet been sold?"

"No, sir. It . . . I have kept it hidden until now."

"Fine. Then we will purchase the entire bolt. No one else is to have a dress that comes anywhere close to the splendor of this one."

"But, sir. There is a great quantity of material here."

"You will use as much as you need for her gown. Here, I have an idea as to how she should look. Have you paper? And pen?"

Carolyn and Marybelle Jones leaned over his shoulder as he quickly sketched a gown of unusual beauty. Fine lines of cloth trailed about a skirt so full it stood out without the use of any petticoats. Yet he carefully

sketched the required number of undergarments underneath it. The neckline was low-cut, with folds of cloth that draped over the shoulders and hung loosely over her back. She gazed at it in awe. She had not thought of William as a designer of women's clothing.

William looked up triumphantly. "This is as close as I can get to the gown worn by the princess the last time I was in London. You are to copy the style to the letter, adapting it only where it is necessary to fit Mistress Carolyn's far more delicate figure."

"The material is to be shirred, then—is that what you intend?" Marybelle leaned over the drawing.

Carolyn picked up a corner of the gleaming cloth. It was satin-smooth, and so transparent that she could see her hand through it. But closely shirred, it became opaque—and totally different in color. She turned back to William. "Oh, it is so beautiful! The design and the material seem to be made for each other. It will be like wearing a glowing confection."

"Most appropriate for one as lovely as you!" He handed the sketch to Marybelle and leaned back in his chair. "Somehow, I find it difficult to understand how you endured life in the wilderness. A woman as gentle and lovely as you belongs in the drawing room—and in the nursery."

She felt a sudden alarm. For the last days of her journey, she had been troubled by a strange malady. Often she had experienced difficulty holding down her food, especially in the morning hours. At the time she had put her concern off, convinced that her malaise was the result of her irregular diet and the difficulty she had encountered on the rough terrain. But this morning she had had her first suspicion that there might be some other cause for her disability. Her bleeding time was due, and so far it had not started. She had not taken the one-day delay seriously, nor did she now. But still, his words left her feeling uneasy.

William glanced up. "Carolyn, you look pale. Are you ill?"

She inhaled deeply. Immediately the momentary faintness passed. "I'm fine. Please forgive me. Possibly I am a bit hungry."

"We'll eat as soon as Mistress Jones takes your measurements. Please bear with that much. It is most embarrassing to have my affianced parading through the streets in such a . . ." He paused, and suddenly his expression softened. "Please ignore my impatience. It's just that you are too lovely to be dressed in rags."

Pulling herself erect, she returned to the center of the room, where she had stood during the beginning of the measuring. "Of course, William. I don't know what got into me. We can wait as long as is necessary." She lowered her head to avoid his eyes. She was just being foolish. It was only the twentieth day of April. She might not expect to begin her bleeding for at least two more days.

Marybelle Jones tucked the picture in her dress and resumed her work. Her nimble fingers flew over Carolyn's body, stringing a measuring tape from shoulder to waist, from peak of bust to shoulder. By the time she was finished, she had a neat row of numbers on a piece of paper. She rose and returned to William's chair. "Will it be convenient for the lady to return in about a week for her first fitting?"

"A week?" William sprang to his feet, his voice strident. "A week? And what, pray tell, do you expect the lady to wear in the meantime?" He stamped over to the six bolts that had been selected, pulled one from the bottom of the pile, and waved it before him. "I expect you to work first on this. And I expect my fiancée to be wearing it tomorrow morning at the latest!"

"But, sir! I have other orders! The general . . ."

"Can wait for that one dress to be finished, at least." William's voice was calm again, and the redness was

gone from his face. "Please, Mistress Jones. Surely you can't expect this lovely creature to walk around like a beggar!"

Marybelle Jones held up one hand, bobbed slightly in a curtsey, and scurried from the room. When she returned, she had a gown draped over her arm. "Lieutenant, I wonder if the lady might find this gown satisfactory—at least until one of her own is finished. She has a figure much like the lady for whom this was designed. But—" She paused, as if considering her next words. "You knew Mrs. Samuel Adams, didn't you?"

William nodded.

"Well, sir, this gown was designed for her before"—again she paused, but William made no attempt to make her task easier—"before she left the city. It is very much the vogue, and I can make any small adjustments needed before you leave."

William stared at the gown. He seemed not to be looking at it at all, but rather to be staring through it at some unseen vision beyond. Carolyn shifted from one foot to the other. She was growing mightily tired of standing. And she *was* hungry. Besides, the dress was lovely. A fine lawn with a delicate leaf pattern woven into the design. The skirt, and most of the bodice, was of the same material and pattern, pale blue in color. The sleeves and a small circle around the neck were of snow-white linen, with a tiny collar of the same blue lawn as the skirt capping the smooth line of the shoulders.

William continued to purse his lips and tense his jaw, his eyes narrow slits that denied her entrance to his thoughts. Suddenly he spoke. "Was it known that the Mistress Adams had ordered this gown?"

"Only to her friends—and they are gone from the city."

He smiled faintly. "It will do, I suppose. But I do not expect to pay for it as if it were new."

"Oh, no, sir!" Marybelle Jones concealed her disappointment under a broad smile. "Whatever you feel is proper." With a gesture to Carolyn that she was to follow, she led the way into a small chamber where the linsey-woolsey was stripped from her body and the delicate gown pulled over her head.

Carolyn could not ignore her irritation at William's pettiness. The gown was lovely. And it fit her as if it had been made for no one else. Marybelle reached into a wardrobe and produced a full petticoat, which she insisted that Carolyn pull on to give the skirt a proper shape. Then the two women stepped back into the larger room.

William rose to his feet as they entered, unable to conceal his satisfaction at her appearance. "A dream of loveliness!"

"And there were no alterations needed. Please, William, it could just as well have been made for me!"

Without responding, he reached into his pocket and drew out a handful of coins. "What is the price then?"

Marybelle did not hesitate, nor did William dispute her tally. He counted out the required amount and put it in the woman's hand. Then he held out his arm for Carolyn. "Come, my dear. I wish you to meet some of my fellow officers."

The rest of the day was spent in visiting and sightseeing. Carolyn lost track of the many names and faces, and she wondered if he would be angered by her inability to remember everyone she met when next she encountered them. Her mother had told her how sensitive the gentry were about such things. But she didn't dare to question him, or to ask for his help in devising a system for memorizing so much information.

They dined at a tavern near the center of the town, and then, just as the sun was coloring the sky with pink, they climbed into the tower and he pointed out the feeble battlements of the provincials.

She gazed at the makeshift barricades with a heavy

heart. She could see campfires dancing in the gloom, and she wondered if the men were being bothered by insects, as she had been while she was in their midst.

"Why so solemn?" William rested his hand on her waist. "Surely you have no sympathy for those traitors to the Crown?"

"Oh, no!" She spoke almost too quickly. "I—" She paused. What was it she felt? Was it regret for the time she had spent growing to know and understand those lonely, angry men? Or was it sadness that soon they would all be dead? "I was thinking of their women, waiting alone back in their homes. I cannot but regret that they have put themselves in so dangerous a position—and for no sensible reason. They are good men, many of them—" She saw his frown, and she hesitated. "Some of them, I'm sure."

"You must not waste sympathy on rebels! General Gage is convinced that two thousands troops are all we will need to squash the entire troublesome affair. They have far more conceit than wisdom and good judgment. No men in their right minds would attempt to fight the British Army with a few muskets and a ragged line of untrained farmers!"

"Yes, of course; I was being foolish." She descended the stairs in silence. She recalled that the "untrained farmers" had succeeded in routing the lines of the well-organized British troops as they returned to Boston from Concord. But then, she suddenly realized, the provincials had not been fighting like real soldiers! They had been playing at being Indians —as if they were continuing the masquerade they had begun in the Boston harbor.

William took her to a large tavern for dinner, informing her that before the blockade it had been the seat of much of the traitorous activity, but that now, taken over by loyalists, it served the army well.

It was, in truth, an excellent tavern, bustling with activity and filled with the odors of cooking vegetables

and roasting beef. Carolyn watched the crowd with growing excitement. It was like a dream. Had she really been trudging along the hills, a musket over her shoulder, only a few days before? Had she ever felt the rough weave of linsey-woolsey against her body?

Everything that had happened to her since her first departure from Fort Pitt did, indeed, seem unreal. Lemelle? Surely he had been a figment of some terrible nightmare. And was General Fairchild really dead? It was hard to believe! Another bad dream, from which at last she was awakening.

And George? Her mind recoiled from the poignancy of her thoughts. She could not think of George. Not yet. For he refused to fit into the dreamlike vagueness of her other memories. He forced himself into her consciousness, touching her breasts with his ghostly hands. And she felt weak and helpless. William touched her arm, murmuring his concern, and she smiled bravely into his eyes. He must never know about George!

A laugh at a nearby table drew her back to the present. Relieved at the diversion, she openly listened to what was being said.

". . . ran one through with my bayonet! Bled like a pig, he did! The filthy rebel! You should have seen the lice leave his corpse! I passed it shortly thereafter, and the ground was literally covered! Disgusting creatures!"

A second voice drowned out the first. "There'll be a rich crop in the hills about Boston come harvest time! Nothing like a good bloodletting to fertilize the crops!

The laughter increased, and suddenly all the men were speaking at once. Carolyn leaned her head against the high back of the chair.

George half-rose from his seat. "Are you ill?"

The laughter seemed far away, and the words of the soldiers ran into each other. She brushed her hand against her cheek. It came away wet with perspiration.

"I—I don't know. It's just that . . . Oh, William, why do they have to talk like that?"

"My dear, until the rebels are beaten, you must expect such sentiments among the soldiers. You can't kill a man you understand—or like. Tomorrow, when they go out to the line, these men will shoot straighter because they have such disdain for the enemy."

There was a taste of bile in her throat, and she washed it away with a sip of wine. "Then war is a horrible thing! And being a soldier is"—she paused, aware that William was frowning again—"the most difficult of tasks!" She blushed. That had not been what she meant to say. Not at all.

He seemed not to notice her hesitation. "Aye, the life of an army man is not all pleasure. There are long marches—and the dangers of ambush. But it has its compensations. Ah, Carolyn, the joy of victory! The feeling of power one has when he stands over a dead foe! That makes the monotony all worthwhile."

She had no answer. With a faint smile, she attempted to resume her eating. But she could not force the food down her throat without a feeling that she was gagging.

In the weeks that followed, Carolyn went often to the tower and gazed out at the rebel army. Each day she expected to see the barricades abandoned—and each day they were as they had been the day before.

Occasionally a small contingent of British troops would venture out of the city and launch an attack on one of the encampments, but the firing was always brief and seldom resulted in any fatalities. It was as if the men on both sides were waiting for some impending event that would make the minor skirmishes simply entertainment used to while away the long delay.

Carolyn had problems of her own. Her bleeding still had not begun, but she refused to consider the implications. She was not herself. She was still recovering

from the irregular meals and the exhaustion of the long foot-journey from New York! Tomorrow it would begin, and she would be fine.

As much as possible she refused to think of her father's continued absence—or about the confusion she felt at the many tales she had heard regarding his loyalty. Surrounded by Tories, it seemed logical to her that her father shared their sentiments. Her mother was confused, just as she herself had been. The rebels were the traitors—the ones to be squashed. When she found herself doubting such sentiments, she busied herself with something that would divert her attention.

Her uncertainties grew frequent with each passing day. She was aware that both William and General Gage expected her father to arrive at any time, and she knew that William intended to plan the wedding as soon as Robert Salford appeared.

Almost every day—and evening—was spent at some social gathering. The dance for which the gown had been made was a gala affair. All the officers attended —even the men from the battleships that rested in the harbor. The women who were worthy of such entertainment were few, and Carolyn found herself the center of much flattering attention. She danced until her feet were sore, and then she danced again, taken up by the glitter and the feeling that she, like some modern Cinderella, had at last found her Prince Charming and been accepted in the world of fashion.

When the music finally ceased, she rode back to the house so lightheaded she barely saw the mud that splattered up on the sides of the carriage or the scrawny, empty-eyed child who waited at the steps to her door, his hand extended in a plea for food.

But when she lay at last in her bed, staring silently at the dim morning glow as it lit the ceiling, she saw the hunger and emptiness of the city again. And this time she had no companion to help her push it away. The British occupying force suffered no hardship be-

cause of the closing of the port. But the natives of Boston were starving!

She buried her head in her pillow and forced her thoughts to more pleasant subjects. There was nothing she could do to alleviate the suffering. That could only be done by the rebels themselves. Surely she was not to blame because they chose to put their own lives in jeopardy.

Maybe tomorrow—today—her father would arrive, and his presence would make all this so much easier to understand! When she at last fell asleep, her dreams were of George—and of the long ride over the Appalachians. And the loneliness that overwhelmed her persisted throughout the following day.

News occasionally leaked through the barricades that surrounded the city. Contrary to all expectations, the rebels seemed determined to destroy their own city. Men who had to leave for their farms were replaced by others. The campfires continued to burn.

General Gage sent a ship to England requesting additional forces to quell the "riot," for that was what he called it in his communication to the king. It was a minor upheaval. It would be over very soon. He ordered his men to cease any independent action against the rebels, and the elimination of this outlet for the soldiers' energies increased the tension in the city. Private spats increased. Men fought over the women who served ale in the wharfside taverns, and feelings rose daily.

Carolyn shared William's hope that the delay, whatever its cause, would soon come to an end. Each morning she asked if her father had arrived the night before. And when she wasn't looking inland for some sign of his horse, she was gazing to the sea, searching the horizon for sails.

The month of May arrived amid general celebration in the officers' quarters. Special May Day balls were

held, and Carolyn had another gown made for the occasion. She was as much lionized as at all the other dances, but somehow she derived less pleasure from all the attention.

As they rode home, their journey eased by the arrival of a morning glow in the sky, William drew her into his arms. "Carolyn, my darling! I have had a most marvelous idea!"

She met his gaze, pleased at any diversion that might lift her ennui.

"I have been thinking much of your father's words when last we met—when I begged him for your hand."

She remembered the scene well. She had been so disappointed at his response.

"Do you remember what he said?"

"Of course. He told you I was too young. He said that when I turned eighteen, if I still wanted to marry you, he would give his consent. It is that for which we are now waiting."

His smile was triumphant. "And how old are you now?"

"Eighteen. I have been for some months."

His face grew serious. "And do you still want to marry me? Will you consent to be my bride?"

She met his eyes. Now she understood. He was saying that they already had her father's consent. They needed to wait no longer.

With a cry of delight, he drew her to him, pressing his body against hers. Nervously she pushed him away. "Please, William! The coachman!"

"Cares not at all what happened behind his back. You must answer me, my dear. I can endure the waiting no longer."

She lowered her head. Did she love him? Or did—had—she meant it when she said she loved George Nelson? Her brow furrowed. Damn him! Why did his name continually push itself into her thoughts?

"Please, Carolyn, do not torment me! Do you love me?"

She forced herself to ignore the heavy weight in her breast. "Yes, William, of course I do."

"Well, then, we already have your father's blessing! I think we should stage a ball—an engagement ball. I have already taken the subject to General Gage, and he has promised to make the announcement for us. If you consented, of course." He kissed her lips, lingering appreciatively. "Come, my dear. Let us begin our plans. If we work fast, we can set the date for the dance for no more than a fortnight hence. And we can be married before we leave for London."

She felt a shock at his words. He had not spoken to her of London before. Not seriously. Not as if he already knew when he would take ship.

But her timid protest was lost in the ardor of his embrace.

Eighteen

"Mistress, it's beautiful!" Lucy stood back in awe and gazed at Marybelle's latest creation. Carolyn had been unable to resist the temptation to display her most recent acquisition to her maid.

It was, in truth, even lovelier than the first gown that had been made of the finely woven cloth Marybelle had shown William only after he had pressed her for something unusual. This was a deep royal-blue velvet, trimmed with ruby roses that circled the low-cut neckline and the edges of the cape sleeves. And to wear with it, George had given her a magnificent ruby necklace and earrings which he said had belonged in his family for many generations.

Carolyn opened the box and beckoned to Lucy to assist her in putting them on. Then, her blue eyes sparkling, she gazed at herself in the long mirror.

This was what she had dreamed of when she was a child! This exquisite garment, sparkling gemstones around her neck. And an attractive man at her beck and call. She had been right, after all. She was not meant for backwoods struggles, nor was she suited to be the wife of a frontier farmer. She belonged, as William so often informed her, at the court, with gowns aplenty—and with every man who met her charmed by her beauty and her culture.

She winced at the last thought. Her mother had done much to guarantee her a proper education, but she was still aware that William often found her lack-

ing. Her skill at the harpsichord was not half that of most of the other women in her small circle of friends. Susan Brent, for example, could sit for hours, her fingers flitting over the keys, and she seemed capable only of producing beautiful music. She could read notes as well—with consummate skill. Carolyn had to concentrate to produce a tune that her companions could recognize.

William, aware of this lack in her training, had arranged for her to take lessons on the instrument, and she spent many hours each day practicing. It was the cause of much despair, for she grew impatient with the clumsiness of her fingers, and often her lesson would end with her in tears.

She glanced about the room. At least there was nothing wrong with her ability to do needlepoint. She was now doing a scene from the estate of General Fairchild that she had drawn from memory and that already had received much attention. General Gage himself had requested that her next project be his palace, an imposing building near the harbor surrounded by a fine growth of old trees.

She was flattered by his attention, and already had secretly made some preliminary sketches. She even dreamed of attracting the attention of other important people—maybe even the king some day, when they visited London.

She sighed. If only she did as well when it came to carrying on a conversation. The other women knew so much about every subject one could name. William informed her that there was a new book published in England that could bring her up to their level of competence—and above. He called it an encyclopedia, and he promised her that he would buy her a set of the tomes as soon as they reached England.

Still, in the meantime Carolyn felt a total dunce except when the subject of the present conflict arose —and then she dared not speak except briefly, for fear

of making her listeners suspicious of her knowledge of the ways of the rebels.

She shone in one other talent, however, and this gave her great pleasure, as well as being a source of pride for William. Her mother had taught her all of the madrigals, and she had a voice that was clear and delicate, and yet carried well. Her father and mother, and her brother, had made it a practice to sing the madrigals in parts, so she had learned to hold her tune no matter who sang beside her. Of this particular ability of hers, William was most conceited, and no evening was complete for him unless he gathered with the other guests around the harpsichord and struck up a tune or two.

Carolyn watched as Lucy smoothed the gown and hung it back in the wardrobe. One more day. Tomorrow night the engagement ball was to take place. And William had made it clear that he considered their engagement almost as binding as the marriage ceremony itself.

"Lucy." The girl closed the wardrobe door and came to Carolyn's side. "Put the jewelry away, too. I am suddenly most fatigued. I think I will rest on the chaise for a time and regain my strength. When is it that Lieutenant Jaeger is expected to return?"

"He left the house early this morning, mistress. But he left word that he would be back in time for dinner. I expect he should arrive any moment. The sun is close to setting."

"Then lay out a gown for tonight, so I can dress after he arrives. I will doze here until then."

Lucy spread a deep-green taffeta gown on the bed and then tiptoed about the room. When she crossed the carpet and opened the door to leave, there was only one candle left burning.

Carolyn leaned back, her eyes half-closed. She was particularly fond of this time of the day, when the sky deepened into night and the sun fought briefly to

maintain its sovereignty in the arch of the heavens. She had once remarked to her mother that she thought the birds were cheering the sun on, hoping that for once the day would never end.

In the two weeks of preparation for the engagement party, one of Carolyn's most troublesome worries had been laid to rest. Her bleeding time had come at last. Lucy had been most helpful in procuring rags to stop the flow, though she had been unable to understand why Carolyn was so pleased with her condition.

There had been no easy explanation of her relief, neither to Lucy nor to William, who had immediately noticed Carolyn's sudden cheerfulness. But at least he had been pleased that she was in good spirits. It was a welcome change from the despondency that was prevalent throughout the city.

The general discouragement began when on May 15, it was learned that five days earlier Benedict Arnold and Ethan Allen had taken Fort Ticonderoga. Two make-believe generals and a band of untrained provincials! It was almost impossible to believe!

Then another upstart, Colonel Seth Warner, with another rabble army, had actually set sail on Lake Champlain and succeeded in the capture of Crown Point! The entire city of Boston recoiled at the news.

As if all this were not enough, Benedict Arnold proceeded toward Fort St. John, and it fell on May 16. In spite of her renewed loyalty to the Crown, Carolyn could not ignore a feeling of elation that threatened to bubble out when William and his friends discussed the grave situation. She could not forget the slaughter on Concord green or the pitiful lack of munitions and supplies that plagued the rebel forces. And yet they had beaten the well-organized British Army! Of course she repressed this illogical delight. She was a good servant of the Crown! Most of the time she even succeeded in forgetting that she had ever felt any other sentiments.

The series of defeats filled Boston with gloom. No party could assemble without someone mentioning the surprising success of the rebels, and the taverns in which the soldiers gathered were the scenes of many fiery altercations. Everyone was on edge—and William often seemed more upset and nervous than any of the others.

Carolyn recognized the gallop of his horse before he turned into the street, and she was on her feet at the window. He called to her as he approached. "Great news! Join me in the study! I have marvelous news!"

Lucy came on the run, and infected by her mistress's excitement, fumbled with the buttons of her dress. At last she sputtered in exasperation. "Please, Miss Carolyn, stand still! I can't find the buttons when you wiggle around so!"

Carolyn inhaled, and the breath served to calm her. William had been enthusiastic for the first time in weeks. Even the preparations for their engagement party had not inspired him as much.

Had the siege at last been broken? She had been far too busy these last few days to venture out on the street, and certainly she had not had time to climb the tower and watch the provincial encampments.

She shuddered. If there had been a battle of which she was not aware, George might be lying dead on some lonely hill.

Lucy let her hands fall to her sides. "Please, Miss Carolyn! You'll never get dressed if you don't stand still!"

Once more Carolyn forced herself to be calm, and this time Lucy completed her task.

William was pacing in front of his desk when she entered the study. "At last! What were you doing, to take so long?" He braced his feet apart and slapped his hand with the nob of his riding crop. "No, don't tell me! I haven't time to listen to trivia now!"

His spirit changed as she settled herself on the

brocade-upholstered couch. And when he settled beside her, he was smiling. "Wonderful news! I rode to the farthest point of land, and using my strongest glass made out the flags on a ship that should approach the harbor within no more than two days. A message preceded the ship by at least a month. The king has at last seen fit to send General Gage the reinforcements he has requested!"

She watched the play of light on his face. He was good-looking when he was inspired. It was the look of boredom which he affected so much of the time that made him unattractive.

He continued without waiting for her response. "Generals Howe, Clinton, and Burgoyne should be on the ship, with troops enough to put an end to this entire affair. Soon, my love, the rebellion will be over and I will be free to return to England."

He took her hands in his. "You will go with me, as my bride. Just think! To wipe the dirt of this God-forsaken land from our feet and never to be forced to look at it again!"

Carolyn made no attempt to conceal her dismay.

His eyes met hers, and he frowned. "That does not make you happy? Or maybe you're ill. Come now, we have spoken often enough of the longing you have to see the king—to take your place in London society."

"Yes. But I do not hate the colonies! My parents and my brother are here." She brushed a tear from her cheek. "I had always thought we would live in the colonies and visit England often. I didn't expect to say farewell to my birthplace."

He was on his feet and pacing once more. "Live *here?* Oh, my dear, you cannot mean that. Surely you understand that if you are going to claim your inheritance, you must live in London."

"But . . ." She felt a rush of panic. "But do we need all that money? Surely you have enough wealth to

serve us in comfort—without the necessity of making so drastic a change in our lives."

He stopped his pacing and gazed fixedly into her face. "Carolyn, you must begin to understand my predicament. You seem totally unwilling to recognize that I face problems as a lieutenant in the British Army—especially since I have ambitions to better myself. There are many expenses. I must give the impression of wealth. But I am only a third son. It is important that I marry a woman with money, for I could never support a wife on my salary alone. Nor could I make the advances that are so important to my career. We must return to London and claim your inheritance. Otherwise there is little reason for us to wed!"

"Little reason?" She gazed at him in horror. "How can you speak like that? What about our love? You have told me you loved me! You have said it many times! Could you deceive me about something as important as whether or not you truly cared?" She felt the tears course down her cheeks and she cursed her weakness.

His expression softened. "Oh, my darling! Please, do not become so upset! You must understand the strain I am under. Of course I love you. Who would not?" She tried to speak, but he held up his hand and signalled her to be silent. "We are to be engaged—tomorrow. Would I plan to spend my life with you if I did not love you? Don't doubt me, please!"

Her mind was awash with confusing questions, and she stared at him in silence.

He settled beside her. "Don't you realize, my dear, that our love and the matter of money are two separate things? They bear no relationship to each other at all. I love you. But I need your money too—at least if we are to be wed. Can't you see? It takes much money to purchase the beautiful gowns you love to wear. . . ." He hurried on before she could interrupt. "Please don't assume that I resent even one purchase. But

you must understand that I have gone far into debt to provide you with these luxuries. And to establish both of us as important members of the upper society in Boston. This must be continued when we reach London. You have made it clear you have no wish for the money for yourself. Surely you cannot deny your husband what he needs—when his only goal is to make you happy."

He began to pace once more. "We do not have to remain in London forever! I ask only that you make it your official residence so that we comply with the requirements of your legacy. As your husband, as a baron, I will have access to the coffers of the Bartlett estate. I will be in a position to take advantage of the recent growth in manufacturing. I will build factories on the land. There will be money enough for everyone! And you, my darling, will wear the most beautiful gowns available from France and Italy!" He stopped abruptly. "Your brother is ready to indicate that he makes no claim to the title, isn't he?"

She nodded. She and Roy had discussed it once, and he had been adamant in his insistence that he had no wish to live in England. "Yes, I'm sure he'll put it in writing, if it is needed."

"It will be. We must be sure to take care of that before we leave for home." His expression grew thoughtful. "Unless he is killed in the fighting. Then you would be the only heir. Am I right?"

She felt a shock. How could he speak of her brother's possible death with such unconcern? But there was more in his behavior that troubled her. She could not put away the feeling that William was suggesting that she desecrate a shrine.

Was it because her mother had spoken so often of the beauty of the Bartlett estates? She could bring the entire mansion to mind without even closing her eyes, and she could see the tree her mother used to climb as a girl.

There were many graves in the small churchyard, but two meant most to her—even though she had never seen them. One belonged to her grandmother, the other to her Uncle Arthur. Both had been filled as the result of a smallpox epidemic that had devastated the country. Her grandfather was not buried in the place reserved for him. His body had been lost at sea when the ship he had boarded for a journey to Calais sank within sight of land. But a stone had been placed over the empty grave in his memory.

She rose and faced William. "We can't tear down the old estate! It wouldn't be right! My mother said my grandfather was strongly opposed to the industrialization of the land!"

He jerked his arm from her grasp and faced into the fireplace, as if he had no wish to see her face. "Balderdash! Why on earth should you cater to the wishes of an old man who was dead long before you were born? The need for change and growth is everywhere! It leads a country upward—and it brings fortunes to those who recognize it!"

He turned and gazed into her face. Tears filled her eyes, and she seemed almost in pain.

As she watched, his expression changed from one of anger to one of deep concern—and love. "Forgive me, my sweet. How can I be so unkind as to trouble you with such problems?" He lifted his hand to her cheek and brushed away the tears. "You should not be bothered with finances. Just trust me, my love. Whatever I do will be for the best—for you, and for me."

She felt herself pulled into his arms, and his lips touched hers. They moved to her ear, to her eyes. He was kissing the tears from her cheeks. His voice was soft, cajoling, pleading. "I love you, my darling. Please, it pains me to see you cry."

She barely whispered. "You won't . . . do . . . all those things?"

He smiled reassuringly. "Consider that the subject was never broached."

She was breathing calmly again. "We won't starve —or have to wear rags—will we?"

"Don't worry your pretty head about such unimportant matters! Of course we won't starve! I'll work things out. When we are married things will be different. You will not have to think of such things again."

"And when we go to England, we can visit the estate?"

"As soon as possible after we arrive in London." He was his usual self again: calm, loving, attentive.

Carolyn relaxed into his arms. "Tell me about the ship you saw."

He looked puzzled for a moment and then he began to speak. "I saw it off the cape, already on its way into the harbor. With the use of my glass I could see the soldiers aboard. Oh, Carolyn, I have convinced General Gage that after we are married I should be sent to London as a special envoy to the king. We will carry information about the victory to London!"

He drew her onto the couch. "Carolyn, my dear, you have told me so little about your journey from Fort Pitt. Did you travel with your father and your brother?" He gazed at the ceiling. "No, now I remember. Your father wrote to General Fairchild that you would be traveling alone—with John Haglund as your protector. You must have been in New York when your father arrived."

"No." As soon as the word escaped her lips, she knew it was a mistake.

"No? If you left with John Haglund, how could you have failed to arrive before your parents?"

She felt suddenly trapped. "I—we—there was some trouble on the road. John was also escorting a prisoner. . . ." Another error! Why was she incapable of logical thought?

His back straightened. "Trouble? Prisoner?"

"We—we ran into some mountain men."

"Rebels?"

"I—I don't know."

The door to the study opened and Brian, the lackey, stepped inside. "Lieutenant Jaeger, sir. There is a gentleman at the door who wishes to speak to you."

"Don't you know his name?" William's voice was sharp.

"Yes, sir! But he requested that I announce him as I did, sir. I have told him to wait in the library."

William rose and strode from the room. Carolyn breathed a sigh of relief. Somehow she had assumed that William would not question her about her journey, since he had seemed to avoid the subject up to this time. And because of his seeming disinterest, she had not prepared answers to his questions.

Now that he seemed intent upon learning all that had transpired, she would have to decide just what she was willing to tell him. Certainly, she would not talk about Jean Lemelle! She would have to account for her time without letting it be known that she had . . . She blushed. At least she had not been left with child!

As for her journey from New York, she would have to determine a way to tell about it without letting William know how close she had been to the rebels. Even though he professed to love her, he might have a hard time defending her were it known that she had helped fire at the retreating British forces after the battle of Concord! She wondered now why she had been so foolish as to do such an irresponsible thing.

She leaned back in her chair and rubbed her forehead. The sound of two male voices reached her, but she was unable to make out any words. It didn't matter, of course. She had more important things to settle.

But it was not easy. She hated to think about those days. Whenever she did, she grew confused and oddly

unhappy. And she began to have doubts. She shook her head and wiped her brow. If only the siege would end, maybe things would be better.

If only her father would arrive! Despite her willingness to announce her engagement to William, she would have been comforted by Robert Salford's presence. It would assure her that what William said about his being a spy was true.

And maybe it would help her to forget George Nelson. Most of all, she needed to forget him.

Nineteen

"May I have this dance?" General Gage bowed gallantly and brought Carolyn's hand to his lips.

She smiled brightly and glanced at the young lieutenant whose name appeared on her dance card. "I am honored, General!"

The young officer grimaced and turned to look around the room. But all the women were on the floor already. He shrugged his shoulders and wandered toward the corner of the great room, where drinks were being dispensed. The fiddlers began the soft notes of a quadrille, and the dance began.

Carolyn let her fingers rest lightly on the back of General Gage's hand. Despite the honor of being selected as his partner, she felt mildly disappointed. He was at least as old as her father—and he seemed so reserved and businesslike that she had avoided him as much as possible in the past.

He had, it was true, become more sociable since the arrival of his fellows. She glanced toward the corner where Generals Howe, Clinton, and Burgoyne were deep in conversation. There was a new spirit in the town. Things were beginning to happen. She wasn't sure whether it was the boats in the harbor or the additional troops in the city that made the difference —but she enjoyed it, nevertheless. General Gage cleared his throat. "Mistress Salford, I have noticed of late that you spend much time observing the rebel encampments."

She was torn from her reverie by his words. "Yes, General. Is it forbidden? I thought . . ." She felt annoyed at her own confusion. "Do I harm anyone by my actions?"

"Of course not, my child! I have just wondered what you make of what you see."

She frowned in concentration. What had she seen lately? Men arriving—and leaving. Officers, or what appeared to be officers, deep in conference. Evening fires. Men and boys moving about as if they, like the residents of the town they were guarding, suffered from boredom.

He noted her silence and continued his questioning. "I am specifically interested in any theories you might have as to why they are so persistent. As you probably know, we fully expected them to abandon the siege in favor of working their farms."

The music drew them onward, but when the pattern of the dance called for the general to advance to the side of the woman ahead of him, he led Carolyn out of the circle into the center of the floor. "I am aware that you passed through their ranks just as they were beginning to form their embankments."

Carolyn flushed, aware of the eyes of the other dancers focused on her. "I—I know that the rebels are most determined to achieve their ends. They—all the ones I met—seemed willing to lay down their lives for freedom."

He scowled. "Freedom?" He was silent for a moment as they executed a particularly intricate step. "Did you know that their *General* Washington has taken charge of the siege forces?"

She shook her head. "William tells me very little. He says he fears it will only upset me."

The general's expression darkened. "I will have to speak to the lad. You are far too intelligent a woman to be shunted to the sidelines. I value the opinion of any good observer."

She glanced into his face. His flattery had a hollow ring to it that upset her. "Why, General! You compliment me! I had not been aware that you thought so highly of my abilities."

His smile seemed forced. Carolyn responded in kind and held her peace. How could he know whether she was a sharp observer or not? Except when actually confronted, he had hardly looked at her—or spoken to her—since the day of her arrival.

They danced for a time in silence, but Carolyn took no pleasure in the music. He was leading up to something, of that she was certain. For the first time since William informed her that General Gage had agreed to announce their engagement, she realized that he might have had some ulterior motive for his kindness.

"You have not answered me, beyond telling me what I already know—that the rebels are a determined lot. I need information that will point to their greatest weakness." His complexion, dark from days in the sun, was strangely mottled, and his jaw was tense.

She frowned. "I'm sorry, General. I am not sure what you mean. Certainly you must know their weaknesses better than I. You know how short they are of munitions. And the countryside is filled with loyalists who do their bit to provide you with news of rebel movements. I am here in the shelter of the British Army—in the center of Boston. I see only what is visible to an observer."

"I was thinking of what, if anything, you might have heard from your father—when you were at Fort Pitt. Did he ever speak in your presence of the plans the rebels had?"

She blanched. "My father! Is something wrong?" She almost forgot her steps in her agitation. "Is he"—she stopped and gazed into his eyes—"dead?"

He drew her back into the dance. "No! Of course not! He is too wise a soldier to get himself in trouble.

On the contrary, I have heard that he has been seen on Bunker Hill, with General Washington."

She was chewing her lip, and she had lost all awareness of the music. "What would he be doing with General Washington?"

"You have not heard from him, then?"

"Of course not! I don't think he even knows I'm here."

The general was silent for a time. When he spoke again, his voice was low. "You have not answered my question as to what you might have overheard of his conversations."

She let her mind wander back to the days at the fort. But try as she might, she could not recall anything that she felt would be of use to the general.

He cleared his throat. "Is it possible that you have some secret method of communication, if not with your father, then with your brother?"

Her eyes widened. "Special system?"

"Yes. It is my understanding that many frontier families devise some private method of communication so that they can call each other if they are in trouble."

She shook her head. Once her father had mentioned such a thing, but for reasons she never understood, he never implemented a plan to put it into effect. "Why would you want me to get in touch with him?"

"Do you think you could?"

She could think of nothing other than risking her life by leaving the city. "No. I don't think I could." Her face brightened. "But surely you have ways of communicating with your men. Won't he just naturally work to get his information to you, through some regular channels?"

He looked at her with sudden sharpness. "Regular channels? Oh, of course!" He was watching her face closely. "It is just that the siege has caused a temporary breakdown of our usual system of intelligence, and

so we are not in a position to keep as close a watch on dissidents." His expression seemed to soften. "However, it is clear that you are as helpless as I am. We can do nothing but wait, and hope that we soon are able to . . . contact . . . your father."

His words filled her with apprehension. "My father is all right, isn't he?" She realized immediately the foolishness of her question—and knew it was not what she had meant to ask. But something sealed her mouth. Again they danced in silence.

"William tells me you were attacked on the way from Fort Pitt. I trust you were not harmed. The mountain men west of the Appalachians are little more than savages. Did you see them at all, or did they attack from ambush?"

She felt on safer ground. "They ambushed us. But I saw only a few of them. They were rough men, dressed in deerskin, and they shot with great accuracy." The memory of John Haglund falling from his horse made her shudder.

"Forgive me if I revive bad memories, but I must know all I can of the people we are fighting. They did not hold you for ransom?"

"No!" Her mind was working furiously. What exactly was it she had told William? Lying was such a trouble. One had to remember so many things! "I was saved from being captured by a rebel who had been on his way to New York for transport to London, where he was to hang. He brought me back to the fort."

"It did not seem odd to you that he would do such a thing?"

She did not answer. He was right. Logic would have led him to act in a totally different manner. "No. He —he didn't seem to want anyone with him who would slow him down."

"Ah! That accounts for it. Then you left Fort Pitt with your father!"

"No." She felt herself blushing. "Geo—the rebel

dared not travel the roads, and so by the time we reached the fort, my father and his party had already departed." She felt on solid ground again. She had rehearsed this part of the story often enough to feel safe in the telling. "I continued on my way with a small group of soldiers from the fort who had been ordered to join my father in New York."

He raised his eyebrows. "Would you know on whose orders they marched?"

"Why, my father's, I suppose." She was growing confused again. "I'm sorry, General, I do not understand. Who else would issue the order?"

"Who else, indeed! I only wondered why he had not taken them with him."

She wished she would not blush so often. "Maybe—maybe they had some chores they had to complete before they left."

"Yes, you're probably right. I forget that supervising a fort in the wilderness is not the same as directing the activities of an army here in Boston." As he spoke, the music came to an end.

General Gage bowed and kissed her hand. "My dear, please forgive me if I upset you with my questions. William is like my own son, and I cannot but be concerned when his fiancée has been in danger. I am thankful that you arrived here safely. You are a most charming girl and I am certain you will make William an excellent wife." His smile was genuine now, and she felt her heart warming toward him. "Thank you for the honor of the dance. Now I will deliver you over to younger, more attractive men."

She curtseyed. "Thank you, General. I apologize for being upset by your questions. That is a period of my life I would sooner forget."

William appeared and with a salute to his commanding officer, led her back onto the dance floor. The strains of a gavotte washed the residue of depression from her mind. With William's hand resting

on her waist, she launched into the spirited dance. Nor did she again think of the strange questions with which General Gage had plied her.

The remainder of the ball was as pleasing to her as any dream she had ever had as a child. Each dance she had a new partner, and every man who led her to the floor showed clearly his admiration. General Howe broke in on one dance, and whirled her around the floor a number of times before returning her to her original partner. Even Generals Clinton and Burgoyne took their turns with great gallantry.

William seemed pleased with her popularity, though he was quick to appear at her side at the close of each dance. On the floor, while he danced with some other lady, she would seek him out. Their eyes would meet, and she would feel a rush of satisfaction mixed with pride, excitement—and anticipation.

The next-to-last dance she had scheduled with a young officer named Eric Lammeter, the only one who had booked his turn without William's consent. It had happened when William was called away from her side momentarily before the music started, and she had not thought to bring it to his attention.

She was aware of William's frown when she took Eric's arm and moved onto the floor. William watched her sharply throughout the dance, but by a quirk, she finished the dance on the opposite side of the room from him, close to the balcony door. Eric took her hand and headed toward the open doorway.

As if by magic, William appeared at her side. "Eric!" His voice was sharp. "I trust you have a partner for the next dance?"

Eric flushed, but he immediately withdrew his hand from under Carolyn's and bowed politely. "Thank you, Mistress Carolyn, for the honor of the dance." He clicked his heels and bowed ever so slightly in William's direction, and then he was gone.

William led her back toward the dance floor. "I

apologize for not stopping him from bothering you, my dear. I should have looked at your card more carefully. Eric is an incurable womanizer, totally lacking in morals. He would steal the governor's wife from under his nose if he found her attractive enough."

Carolyn glanced at the departing culprit. "He seemed polite enough, at least during the dance."

William's jaw tightened. "Men become strange when they are long without women, and most of Eric's conquests are far below his station. He has come to look on all women as . . ." He paused. "Let me see your dance card. If there is another like him on it, I would not wish to have you bothered again."

She relinquished her card reluctantly. She had been annoyed at his supervision of its original makeup. For him to act as if she might have changed it, just because of one error. . . . "William, this is the last dance, and I have it with you! Do you wish me to sit it out—or join the old women in their gossip?"

He frowned. "Are you angry? Do you wish, then, that I had left you with Eric?"

"Of course not! I appreciate your catching him before he compromised me by leading me onto the balcony. But do you really believe that I would have allowed him to touch me? If that is what you think, you insult me!"

He had tucked her card in his pocket. "My dear, I cannot but be jealous of you. We have been together for weeks now, and I have treated you with the greatest respect. Yet I have received no more affection from you than you would give a brother. I want no competitors for your charms."

"But, William, I will never understand you! We are almost engaged! Why would I choose to look at another man?"

His eyes burned into hers. "Why, indeed. You are right, of course. But that does not change the way I feel. I lie awake nights, thinking of your journey from

Fort Pitt. You tell me that though you were alone with the rebel, nothing happened between you. But can I believe you? Just the thought that he has had the opportunity to sit beside you, the possibility that he might have seen you in the bath. You did tell me you bathed in a stream on your way, did you not? That a traitor should have you alone, even for a small part of one day, when I have been unable to convince you of my rights as your affianced. Oh, Carolyn"—his voice was pleading—"you torture me with your elusiveness!"

Carolyn glanced quickly around, but no one seemed to pay the slightest attention to his rising voice. She knew of what he was speaking. It had been a sore point in their relationship since the day of her arrival.

He looked at her now, his eyes narrowed in suspicion. "I have heard rumors that lead me to believe you might not have spoken the truth when you told of your journey. Can you swear to me that you come to me now as innocent as when last I saw you at Fort Pitt?"

Carolyn repressed her inner trembling. Holding her head erect, she met his gaze. She had faced the problem when she was alone—and she had failed to reach a decision. William had proven himself to be kind and considerate, but because of some inner perversity she still clung to George. She had searched her heart often, hoping to find a new affection forming around her image of William, but none developed. He was not a man to be loved. She liked him—or at least she persuaded herself that she did. But love him she could not.

"Tonight, William, I will not put you off." Even as she spoke, she knew she did not mean what she said. Yet they were engaged now, and she was not so much a child that she did not know that many engaged couples consummated their unions as soon as the engagement was announced. The reason was understandable. No

man, aware of the importance of having an heir, would marry a woman who was not proven to be fertile.

The thought sent a chill up her spine. She had not conceived yet, though she had been taken more than once. Was that not proof enough that she would never bear a child? And what would happen if William took her and learned of her incapacity—she braced herself metally before continuing—of her barrenness?

For the thousandth time she prayed for her father to arrive. How she needed his advice! Even though the subject was delicate, she would dare to speak the truth about her adventures in the wilderness around Fort Pitt—and even about her feelings for the rebel, George. But she could never ask William to understand.

She had dreamed, for a time, of taking General Gage into her confidence. But his manner during the dance had convinced her that his sympathies were too strongly with William.

Ideally she should be able to consult her mother. But the siege kept her from journeying back to New York.

William took her hands in his and drew them to his lips. "Oh, Carolyn, if you mean what you have just said, you make me the happiest man in the world! You do mean it, don't you?"

Her mind protested, but she nodded her head in assent. He was, after all, only a man. And it was well known that men felt passion far more strongly than women. She would have to face this sometime. And surely she could endure it, after all she had been through in the past.

She carefully kept her thoughts from centering on the wild rapture she had felt as she lay in George's arms, or on the stirrings of longing she felt whenever she did permit herself to remember his caresses. As she moved gracefully across the dance floor, she tried to hold her emotions under control. George had de-

ceived her. He had attacked her. He had taken her against her will. What made her think she had felt ecstasy in his arms, when the logical emotion for a girl so roughly handled would be anger and fright. That was it! She had wanted only to escape from him! And her wish for freedom had stirred her passion!

The last dance came to an end and the dancers gathered for a final glass of spirits and a small taste of the sweets she had prepared. The conversation was brisk and lively, filled with joviality and camaraderie. Everyone seemed to want one more opportunity to speak to friends before returning to military posts—or to bed.

The musicians packed away their instruments and filed silently from the hall. The servants began to remove the empty glasses. One by one the guests said their farewells and departed.

At last William and Carolyn stood alone, watching the final guests depart down the broad staircase to their carriages. Carolyn turned, a frown marring the smoothness of her forehead. "William"—she spoke quietly—"General Gage acted very strangely at the beginning of the evening. He asked me about my father, as if he expected that I might have knowledge unavailable to him. It seemed odd—since you informed me that General Gage is my father's superior, his commanding officer!"

"What did he ask? Did he question you extensively?"

"No. But I . . . oh—" She felt a need to reassure herself. "I was probably only imagining. But I had the feeling that he had no expectation that my father would return to Boston." The full portent of her words brought an overwhelming panic. "He's dead, isn't he? General Gage said he was with General Washington, but that isn't true, is it? I can see it all, now! He's dead, and General Gage was trying to think of a kind way of informing me!" She felt hot tears run down her cheeks, and she blotted them with her kerchief.

"No! He has no such knowledge! I have not had time to report to him since my last informant arrived. He is right that your father is at present attending General Washington. He has sent a message to me through a beggar who slipped into town this afternoon. There seems to be a weakening of some of the defenses. He will let us know when the level of protection is the lowest, and it is then we will attack."

Carolyn looked up into his face. She had been pleased with his appearance at the beginning of the evening. He, as well as the other officers present, had been dressed in his bright red uniform. That had satisfied her greatly. He looked far more rugged when he did not wear his civilian clothes, and she had been afraid he would wear one of his foppish outfits to their ball. But now he appeared even more handsome.

She felt his hands encircle her waist. He brought his lips close to hers. "Please, my love, enough of such matters! Rest assured your father is safe—and well. And your brother, too. This is our night! Let us enjoy what is left of it!"

She let her head rest on his chest as they turned and climbed the stairs to her room. She was suddenly so very tired. She wondered if he would be angry if she were to delay what lay ahead until morning, when she felt more rested.

"William . . ."

His mouth covered hers, and he pulled her against him. His voice was gentle. "Oh, my darling! Thank God the waiting is over! I could not have endured it much longer."

As he pushed open the door to her chamber, she saw the long bulge under his breeches, and she knew that the time for excuses was past. Whatever the outcome, she had to give William his way.

Twenty

William's lips trailed from her mouth to her shoulder, sending shivers of delight down to her breasts. He would come to them next. As soon as they had reached her room, William had dismissed Carolyn's maid, and he was taking over her duties. At the moment, this entailed the removal, one by one, of the garments his affianced had worn to the ball.

Carolyn felt a tingling growing down her arms. She had been right! William was as forceful in his love as he appeared to be in all other aspects of his life.

He slowly peeled the velvet gown from over her arms and slid it down to her waist, letting it hang on the fullness of her petticoats. Her fine linen chemise was all that stood between him and her pointed nipples, and he loosed it impatiently. Carolyn surrendered herself into his care with a feeling of growing passion.

She had worried, as they ascended the stairs, as to what she would say if, when at last he entered her, he realized that he was not the first. But her mind had refused to function. And now it was lost, indeed. It followed his tongue as it circled her nipples, but it refused steadfastly to concern itself with doubts and worries.

He moved, cupping her breasts in his hands and pulling them together so that he could, with a simple side movement of his head, touch one nipple and then the other. Carolyn felt her body convulse with a sudden ecstasy. The heat of his breath sent a wave of

warmth down her smooth belly, and suddenly she was aware of a growing moistness between her legs, a moistness that spread as he continued his ministrations. Aware as she was of the swelling passion that threatened to overcome her senses, she moaned softly.

He lifted his head and silently resumed the task of undressing her. The gown was opened further and slipped to the floor. Then, one at a time, the petticoats followed. As he reached the end of his duties his fingers began to tremble with impatience, and she felt herself reflect his nervous tension. Would they never be off?

The last petticoat refused to respond to his tug, and he cursed audibly. Carolyn tried to take over the task, but he pushed her fingers aside.

"Damn!" The expletive was more forceful. Still the buttons refused to give way. His fingers worked around the waistband and with a sudden jerk the stubborn opening was torn apart. As if inspired by his own violence, William continued to rip the garment from her body.

Carolyn grabbed at his hands. "No! Please!" The protest fell on deaf ears. The petticoat was in shreds, and she stood naked before him.

His hands flew now to his own clothes. He fumbled first with his belt and then with the row of buttons that covered the long bulge that threatened to break through his trousers. As he pulled the heavy wool down over his hips, his manhood thrust itself forward, so imposing that Carolyn gasped in alarm.

She had no time to contemplate the fate that lay ahead. She was in his arms, being carried across the room to the bed. Almost unconsciously Carolyn noted that the covers had already been turned down, probably by the maid before she was sent from the room.

The mattress sank beneath Carolyn's weight as she fell, and before she could recover herself, he was upon

her. "Please, William!" She could hardly speak the words. "You hurt me!"

He paid no attention to her complaint. She felt him push against her, felt the pain of his hardness as it caught the softness of her feminine parts. He groaned and lunged forward, his eyes closed in apparent ecstasy.

The suddenness of his approach startled Carolyn, but she resisted the impulse to push him away. This was her affianced. She must love him! Deliberately she forced her body to relax below him.

Slowly the rhythm of his thrusts increased, and her body responded to his movements. Deep in her abdomen it began, growing until she was lost in the pulse of passion. Her body grew warm—hot with desire for more pressure, more closeness—more love. Imperceptibly, her hips began to rotate.

She began to breath more quickly, and a strange dizziness possessed her brain. Her lips parted. "George!"

She knew as soon as the name was spoken that she had damned herself forever. At the sound of her voice, William halted his movement and stared into her clouded eyes. She tried to focus on his face, but she could not. But yet she was aware that his jaw was set in anger.

With sudden fury he resumed his thrusts, pushing her into the softness of the mattress. His fingers tightened around her wrists as if he wished to break them.

She lay helpless below him, aware that with that one word she had destroyed the fragile affection that existed between herself and the man to whom she had pledged her life. Repentant, she submitted in silence, even when the violence of his anger brought her pain. She deserved whatever he might do to her. How could she have thought of George? What perverse devil inside her brought his name to her lips when her thoughts were firmly fixed on William?

When at last he lay quiet above her, she knew more than regret. The icy fury in his eyes filled her with terror. The grasp of his hands on her wrists did not grow looser, and the pressure of his body on her hips was inspired by the force of hate. Looking up into his hard face, she knew again the fear that had possessed her as she traveled with Jean Lemelle.

"Bitch!" His voice hit her like a slap in the face. "Whoring, filthy bitch!"

She cringed, waiting for a blow that did not come. When he did not move, she looked up into his eyes. "Please, William, I don't know what possessed me! I . . ."

"You revealed what you have been hiding since you took advantage of my love! No wonder you put me off! No wonder you were fearful of this night! You knew it would be the end of my indulgence!" Too angry to remain still, he rose suddenly and stood above her. "Tell me now. There is no reason for further lying!"

She looked up at him, her mind reeling. How could she make him understand. She had put George behind her. She wanted no one but William, nothing but to be the wife of a loyal man whom her father would accept.

"Please, William! I don't know why that name came to me!" She felt the tears well up in her eyes, and she cursed her weakness. "I love you. Please, William!"

His expression did not change. "If you love me, why did you not speak my name?" His voice grew colder, the irony and anger spilling out with each word. "Is it possible, my sweet, that the names are so alike I misunderstood? Or is there a George who has cuckolded me before we were even married?"

She stared at him in growing confusion. There had been, in her heart, no awareness of a rift in her loyalty. She was resigned to her marriage. Resigned? No! She was happy at the thought of marrying William! Then

why had her body betrayed her? Why had her lips said the name she thought she had forgotten?

"Say it! Say it now! I am not the first to lie between your white thighs! Tell me all the secrets you have kept hidden!" His face grew red with anger and he bent down over her, his fist close to her chin. "Speak! I *will* know!"

With sudden fright she pulled a blanket up to cover her nakedness. "William—" Her terror grew with each word. He would never understand! Yet, she had to speak. "You're wrong! It isn't true, what you are thinking." He snorted and began to pace the room. "Please, let me tell you!"

"Oh, now you want to speak! Have you, then, shaped your next lie? I want the truth, Carolyn! No more fairy tales! No more falsehoods!" He stood again beside the bed.

She was weeping uncontrollably, and sobs interrupted her speech. "I didn't dare to tell you. I was afraid you wouldn't want to marry me. I was too ashamed to speak of it."

"As you should have been! Slut! Too ashamed to speak, but not too ashamed to consider deceiving me into marriage!"

"I was taken by force! Not by my own wishes!" Her thoughts flew back to the terror of Lemelle's attack, and she shuddered. "Oh, William, it was terrible!"

"So terrible that you cry out the bastard's name when you are in my arms? Don't lie to me, Carolyn! There was no terror in your voice!" He strode to the window and stared out into the street below. When he returned to her side, his face was set. "Do you think I should want you now?"

"Please!" Sheer terror possessed her. Terror at his fury, terror at the thought of his rejection. "When the mountain men attacked, I escaped. That part of my story was true. And then I was kidnapped by a French-

man who tried to bring me to New Orleans! He . . ." Even now, when the truth meant so much, she could not speak easily about her shame. The words stuck in her throat.

He watched her with eyes that narrowed in unappeased anger. Then, with a curse, he resumed his pacing. Each time he approached the bed, he cursed her, but before he could strike her, he turned again and stamped across the room. His fists pounded, not at her bare flesh, but at each other, until his knuckles were white and the veins stood out on the backs of his hands.

"Tell me now! Tell it all!"

She tried to speak, but no sound came from her throat.

"The Frenchman, was he the first?"

She barely nodded, aware with a growing shame that even in fear of her life she could not speak of George.

"Did he come upon you as soon as you escaped from the mountain men? Were you alone until then?"

Her "no" was so faint that he bent down to hear her. "Answer me! I will brook no more deceit!"

She responded then, and he swore with increased fury. He prodded her with questions, pushing the words from her lips until at last the entire truth of her journey lay before him. Lemelle, the bestial Frenchman who had torn into her body with no regard for her helplessness.

And George.

When she spoke his name aloud, William cried out in anger. "George! That was the name you spoke! That is the name of the man to whom you gave what was rightly mine! It is he who robbed me of your innocence, who took my bride out of my arms!"

She clutched at the blanket and avoided meeting his eyes.

The red of his face turned slowly to a deep purple.

"Say it! Say it, or I'll . . ." He raised his hand over her, and his eyes cut through her terror.

She quivered, recoiling from his blow, but his hand stopped short of its destination. She was babbling in fear now. He was going to kill her, of that she was certain. "No! William, I tell you, no! I hate him! He ruined my life! He forced himself upon me when I was helpless! I have wanted to be your wife from the moment we first met! Please, you must believe me! I . . ."

He lowered his hand to his side. "Believe you? *Must* I, now? Are you such a fool as to believe what you are saying? You hate him, do you? And just how much do you hate him? If I dragged him in here now, would you rejoice to see him die, inch by inch, as I stripped him of his manhood? Would you laugh with me as he screeched in agony?"

She blanched. "You have him? You knew all along?"

"Aha!" His eyes were bright with triumph. "Look into your heart again, my little whore. That is not hate I see. Deceitful bitch! You have loved him all the while. You accepted my gifts and my attentions—and your heart was elsewhere."

He had not bothered to close his trousers, and she realized with a growing horror that his passion was rising once more. Suddenly, he tore the blanket from her grasp and threw it to the floor. "Don't cover yourself from me, slut! You are not with your lover now! You are with your *master!* Do you understand me? You are with your *master!*"

He grabbed her legs and swung her around so that her feet touched the floor. With a lunge, he pushed himself up into her body.

She cried out at the suddenness of his attack, but he paid her no heed. His jaw was tight with anger, and his face was hard and cold. In and out he ham-

mered, forcing her to lie still—wanting to inflict pain without any pleasure.

His elbows held her arms pinned down to the bed, and his fingers dug into her breasts. She tried to scream, but no sound came through the dryness of her throat. She was gasping for air, clawing for freedom—and he showed no concern for her at all.

Then, once more, slowly, the response began. She hated herself for its presence—but she could not deny it. Her struggle for freedom changed to a willingness to accept him again. But she was too weak to move, too beaten to join in the wild rhythm of his passion. A moan escaped her lips.

He withdrew so suddenly that she gasped in shock. His face, floating above her, was demoniac, and his fingers dug into her shoulders with practiced violence. She was lifted from the bed and spun over so that she lay on her stomach, her head buried in the soft mattress. She gasped for air, and braced her chin on her hands.

When he tore at the flesh of her backside, she screamed, but he laughed evilly in response. "So you know what I am going to do? Was it Lemelle who showed you this road to oblivion?" He prodded between her cheeks, seeking the opening. "You will learn to take me with as much abandon this way as any other! You will learn that your new master is better than a bumbling Frenchman!"

She felt the prod reach its goal and then came the searing pain. She screamed again—and then she lost consciousness.

When she awakened, she was lying on the bed, the covers over her shoulders. William was sitting in an armchair. His complexion was again normal. His eyes were dark, and his hands were out before his chest, his fingers touching. She recoiled when she saw him, but he did not move in her direction. Then she saw that he was dressed, and her panic subsided.

"Aha! You are awake at last! You must learn to overcome such weakness. I have no interest in whores who cannot respond when I take them!"

She glared at him in silence. It was over. There was nothing more he could do to her—except end her misery. And death she would welcome now.

He tapped his fingers together. "We must reach an understanding. You can say nothing that will alter my intention to have your estate. I have been considering the situation. We will marry, for that is the only way I can achieve my goal. We will marry. But we will do so in London, before the entire court, so the prime minister and the king can vouch for the authenticity of our contract. And then, my love"—his voice grew colder—"you will truly be my property! The laws of England are very clear on that point. Your estates will be mine, and I will do with them as I wish. And you will have no recourse."

"My father! You have said he is due here shortly. He will not permit such a travesty! He will come—and he will have you thrown in prison!" Her eyes widened as she spoke. William was smiling broadly.

"Your father? God, what an imbecile you are! A fool! It seems almost a shame to disabuse you of your ignorance."

"What do you mean? You said . . ." She saw his eyes. "General Gage told me . . ." His smile turned into a laugh. She stopped speaking, understanding at last flooding her mind.

But William was reveling in his power. "General Gage said nothing! *I* said your father was coming because it served my purpose to let you believe he was loyal to the Crown." He leaned forward and fastened his eyes on hers. "Tell me, my sweet, would you have agreed to our marriage had you known your father was a traitor?"

She gasped. "No! He isn't!"

He paid little heed to her words. "I doubt it! That much I suspected from the start. You are a traitor, as you clearly have been from the very start. Was it your George who turned you from the loyal follower of the king that you were when first I met you?" She repressed a shiver, but he smiled with certain understanding. "So that is it! The way to this little rebel's loyalty is through her emotions! Had I reached you first, you would have been the king's loyal subject for the rest of your life!"

She felt a trembling shake her body. She had not imagined that he could devise so diabolical a plan! Somehow, she wasn't certain how, he would keep her silent during the wedding. And then? He would need her no longer. Or would he? Maybe he would still find her useful as a bait to get her father—and maybe her mother—under the control of the king's men.

Clutching the blanket before her, she rose and stood facing him. "Don't you dare speak like that! You're a liar! A thief! You wanted me from the beginning only because you wished to have my estate! And you think I'll marry you now? Think again! I'll die first!"

His laugh echoed through the chamber. "You have little choice. You will see! As for dying, I doubt it! Here." He rose suddenly and took his musket from where it stood in the corner of the room. "Here! Kill yourself!" He tossed it onto the bed.

She stared at it in horror. Then, tenuously, she reached out a hand and touched it. It was so cold—so final! If she turned it toward herself and pulled the trigger, her life would be over.

Slowly she lifted it up and held it before her. Could she do it? She glanced at William. He was watching her with a mocking smile. Her wrist turned, and the muzzle pointed to her own head.

For one moment she held it still and then, with a sudden lunge, she swung it around and aimed it direct-

ly at his head. The hammer hit cold metal with a snap —but no explosion followed.

He was on his feet beside her. His hand closed over hers and the musket was wrenched from her fingers. "So you'd kill yourself first, would you? Bitch! I thought as much! You'd try to kill me!" He threw the gun onto the chair and pushed her back onto the bed. "Well, you will have no further opportunity for such perfidy!" He strode to the door and threw it open. "Brian! Henry! Come here!" As he called, he jerked viciously on the bell that summoned the servants.

She heard a scuffling in the hallway and two lackeys appeared. Startled, she pulled the blanket over her nakedness, but William paid no attention to her condition. "The wardrobe! Remove it!"

The two men moved forward, their eyes on the bed. She felt a flush of shame. They knew! She could feel their lust, and for one moment she was thankful that William was present. Then a cold fear cut through her relief. He could, if he wished, order them, too, to take her.

Together the two servants lifted the wardrobe and dragged it clumsily across the room and through the open doorway into the hall. When they were gone, William picked up the petticoats that he had scattered about the floor so long ago. When he had her gown and all of her undergarments over his arms, he returned to the door. "You are deathly ill, my dear. I will give your apologies to General Gage and to the others. They will not miss you at the future festivities. And do not bother to try to call for help. I will have the window sealed if you do, boarded so tightly you will have no glimpse of the sky!"

"William! You can't do this!" She was speaking to empty air. Behind the closed door she could hear the servants struggling to carry the heavy wardrobe down the stairs.

She leaped to her feet and ran to the door. But the handle did not turn. Before he had vanished, William had taken the key from the inside, and the door was locked securely. She was a prisoner! And there was no way she could escape!

Twenty-one

Carolyn rose from her chair, her heart beating wildly. Someone was turning the key! Swiftly she tightened the blanket she had wrapped around her body and moved closer to the door. It swung open before she reached it and Katie, one of the kitchen maids, stepped inside.

"Katie!" Carolyn spoke with a rush. "I'm being held prisoner here! You must help me!"

Katie lowered her eyes. "Mum, I've been told to empty your chamber pot and bring you fresh water."

Carolyn took her arm and tried to stop her forward motion, but Katie jerked herself free and almost stumbled in her eagerness to avoid further contact. "Please!" Carolyn felt a rising panic. "Don't you hear me? I need your help!"

It was then that Carolyn saw William standing silently in the doorway. Her eyes met his and she turned, temporarily defeated.

It had been a frightening day and night, filled with half-formed plans for escape that all ended in despair. William had not returned for a full twenty-four hours, nor had she, in that time, received any food. She had washed the stains of his contact from her body, praying all the while that he had been as unsuccessful as George in making her with child.

She had slept as much as she could, for when she was sleeping, she was not aware of her hunger—or her fear. Now she knew that she could no longer ignore

her plight. If he planned to starve her to death, she would have to make at least an attempt to break free.

Katie deposited a new chamber pot under the bed and carried the old one into the hall. Then she returned with a pitcher of water and a clean wash bowl. She emptied the full wash bowl back into the used pitcher and carried both of them out of the room. Carolyn realized that her time for speaking was running short. "William, you do not have to keep me locked up here! Where can I go? I was as much your prisoner before . . . last night!"

He stared at her in silence, a mocking smile on his lips. As Katie passed him with the pitcher, he grasped the door handle and began to pull it closed. Carolyn clawed at the door. "Please! Don't lock me in again! I'll do whatever you want! Please! I'm hungry—and I cannot stand this confinement!"

The door slammed shut, almost catching her fingers. The key turned—and she was alone once more.

Sobbing, she returned to her chair. He was planning to torture her until she was willing to submit to anything—even marriage which she knew would end in her death! She lifted her head and stared about her. Well, he would find it was not so easy a task! She might pretend obedience and compliance, but she would only be waiting for the right moment to break for freedom.

The thought calmed her. He would feed her eventually. He had to keep her alive until they were married. And had he not said he wanted the wedding to take place in England? She inhaled deeply. She could be patient. Eventually her time would come.

The key turned again, but this time she did not rise from her chair. Katie entered timidly, a tray of food in her hands. Behind her, shielded by the door, she could see the form of a man.

"Here's your food, mum." Katie placed the tray on

a small table beside the chair. "The master said you seemed to have recovered yourself slightly."

"Thank you, Katie." Carolyn hesitated only momentarily. "Would it be all right for you to help me comb my hair? I feel such a mess."

Katie glanced quickly toward the door. When she looked back, her face was tight with embarrassment. "I'm sorry, miss. I can't do that. I—I don't know how."

Carolyn decided to avoid embarrassing the girl further. "It's all right, Katie. I can do it myself. What does the master say is my trouble?"

Katie lowered her eyes. "He says he fears for your life, mum. He says you were most upset when he had to finally admit to you that your father was a"—she hardly could end her sentence—"traitor." She blushed and bobbed in a curtsey. "Beg pardon, ma'am, he says it drove you mad."

Carolyn looked into the simple face. Then her eyes roved past the girl to the mirror that stood against the far wall. William had made his accusations with foresight. She had been so distraught by all that had happened that she had not given any care to her appearance. Her hair was ragged, her face streaked with tears. And without her clothes!

"Katie, do I sound mad?"

Katie shook her head. "That don't matter much, mum. I know people who are mad as jays who speak like the rest of us. It's what you say that tells me!"

"Then listen to what I say." Carolyn struggled to keep her voice at a whisper. "Are you loyal to the king?"

Katie blushed, her face filled with suspicion. "Are you trying to trap me, mum? Would I still be in Boston were I a traitor?"

Carolyn sighed. "Forgive me. I had no right to ask. But why do you think I am locked in here without even a dress to cover my nakedness?"

"The master says you tried to kill him—and your-

self. I'm surprised he leaves you with so much furniture. There are many . . ." She stopped suddenly. "He said you couldn't be trusted." Her face assumed a set appearance. "Ain't you gonna eat?"

Carolyn grabbed her fork and began to shovel the food into her mouth. Despite her hunger she chewed it carefully, mindful of her father's warning about fast eating. She did not speak again until her plate was empty. "Thank you, Katie, you saved my life!"

Katie bobbed once more, picked up the tray, and scurried to the door. A male voice muttered something about "taking too much time," and then the door was shut and locked.

Carolyn stared at the wooden panel. She had been right in assuming that William—or one of his lackeys—accompanied Katie. But if she made no trouble, the time would come when such a precaution would be considered unnecessary. And then she would make her move. Katie was not strong enough to deter her from attempting to gain her freedom.

For the thousandth time she rose and walked to the window. Below, the bustle of the city had increased as the noon hour approached. Tradesmen who had sold little during the morning hours stood at the doors searching the street for customers. But the bulk of the men who passed down the road were too poor to purchase anything. Yet there was a pride in the way the men deported themselves.

When a small contingent of soldiers marched past, the citizens barely stepped aside to let them through, and a small child ran after the red-coated band, thumbing his nose at them and mocking them with his walk. Carolyn watched the child with growing surprise. No one paid him the slightest heed. When he was joined by a group of other boys and they all proceeded to mock the soldiers, one of the tradesmen laughed.

In the days since her arrival in Boston, Carolyn had

paid little heed to most of the natives. Now she realized they were rebels at heart. They had just lacked the means of escape when Sam Adams and John Hancock left for Concord. If she could attract the attention of someone on the street, she might be rescued.

She lifted her hand to tap on the window, but her arm stopped in midair. William's words still rang in her ears. She suffered enough confined in one small room. If she also were to be put in total darkness, she would die for certain!

With a sob she leaned her head against the pane and stared downward. Freedom was so close. There had to be some way she could break out! But when she tried to formulate a plan to regain her liberty, her mind began to spin. She felt befuddled, confused—and oddly unsure of herself.

And sleepy. Wiping the tears from her cheeks, she plodded to the bed and lay down. When she opened her eyes, the room was dark. One more day had passed in solitude.

She awoke with a start. William was standing over her bed, the odor of ale heavy on his breath. He was drunk as a lord.

Without a *by your leave,* he tore the blankets from her and fell on top of her. He pushed into her unprepared flesh with a brutal lunge, moved swiftly, grunting, and then abruptly his body stiffened.

She had barely been awake when he fell upon her, and she endured his assault without a protest. Her mind rebelled at such an unfeeling approach, and her body refused to respond to his motions. When he rose to his feet, she inhaled deeply.

Without looking at her face, he grabbed a corner of her blanket and wiped his abdomen. Then he was gone. The door opened softly, closed, and the key turned in the lock. He had not said one word to her during the entire episode.

Trembling, she rose and poured water into the basin. Using a corner of the dresser scarf, she washed her crotch and her legs. Then she swiftly wiped the perspiration from the roundness of her stomach and the fullness of her breasts.

But she still felt dirty when she returned to her bed. He had left his seed inside her, and she had no way to wash it out.

When morning came, she washed herself again, aware of the strange lassitude that possessed her body. She was standing at the window when Katie brought her food. With a docility she could not explain, Carolyn moved to the chair and sat silent as Katie put the tray on the table. As soon as the girl stepped back, Carolyn took the spoon and ate quickly. Then, exhausted, she returned to her bed.

She awoke when the sun was high in the sky, spilling puddles of brightness on the carpet near the windows. The room seemed to spin around her, but she forced herself to rise and walk to the mirror. The face that she saw was that of her mother. Tears flowed down her cheeks. "Oh, mama! He has hurt me so! What shall I do?"

The sound of her voice startled her. Burying her face in her hands, she stood sobbing, overcome with a new horror. William was succeeding! She was going mad!

And still she was so tired! Her stomach ached, and her muscles hurt painfully when she moved. She tried to think of a way to free herself, and her mind refused to function.

Most of her time was spent in confused dreams of George. He was serving General Washington. He was with her father. He was beside her, comforting her, holding her in his arms, protecting her from the terrors that surrounded her. Shielding her from William.

He came to her every night. She would go to bed,

sprawled on the mattress in the strange exhaustion that seemed never to leave her, and then she would hear the key in the lock. Most of the time, he was drunk. But even when he was sober, he treated her like a whore. He lowered his trousers, fell upon her, took his pleasure, and then without a word left the room. She counted the visits, and through them she kept a record of the time. Five days passed with no sign of change.

Her fear that she might be killed abated. He came every day. He would keep her alive, of that she felt certain. He needed her if he was to gain the fortune that awaited her in England. Somehow he would force her to consent to the marriage. Without her as his bride, he had nothing.

She wondered how he would go about achieving his ultimate end, but her thoughts, as usual, began to drift.

She was almost asleep when the sounds of gunfire roused her into wakefulness. Rising, she staggered to the window and strained to see. But the street was empty, and the rattle of shots receded until it was no longer audible. Wherever the fighting had taken place, the redcoats had won again.

When she returned to her bed, her heart was heavy. How much more could she endure? And then her thoughts wandered back to the happy days, when she had traveled with George. When she slept, it was the sleep of the innocent.

Twenty-two

Katie pushed the door open and stepped into the room, the tray held before her. "Mum? Are you awake?"

Carolyn sat up, swung her feet to the floor, and walked to the chair. She was so tired. So tired she hardly had the strength to eat.

"I'm sorry, mum, but I had to come early today. The master has me busy packing."

The fog that seemed to surround all her thoughts cleared slightly, and Carolyn gazed up at the troubled girl. "Packing?"

"Yes, ma'am. Ain't you heard the shooting?"

Carolyn nodded. Why was it so hard for her to keep her attention focused? Why did Katie's face seem to fade and spin?

"Well, ma'am"—there seemed to be a slight hint of satisfaction in her voice—"the rebels are attacking the city! General Washington . . ." She stopped abruptly and put the food down on the table. Carolyn stared into the pale eyes. Was the girl, after all, sympathetic to the militia? She took up the spoon and brought a mouthful of food to her lips.

Katie turned and pulled the chamber pot from under the bed. "If it's all right with you, ma'am, I'll just go about my chores while you eat. I'm expected back in the kitchen soon. There's so much work to be done."

Carolyn lowered her spoon. If Katie was not going to watch her eat, as was her custom, maybe she would

wait. The food was fragrant enough, but somehow the odor filled her with an uneasy nausea. Resting her arms in her lap, she watched as Katie moved out of the room with the pot in her hands.

Carolyn stared down at the plate. If she let Katie take it back to the kitchen, she would have nothing to eat later, when she might feel more hungry. Yet despite her awareness that her opportunity would soon pass, she could not force the food into her mouth.

With sudden inspiration she opened the drawer of the table and scraped the food into it. When Katie returned, she held up the empty plate. "Thank you, Katie. It was good, as usual."

Katie barely nodded. She picked up the water pitcher and vanished again. When she returned, it was filled with fresh water. Then, taking the empty plate, she curtseyed and left the room. The key turned in the lock. The day's visit was over.

Fatigued by the exertion, Carolyn staggered to her bed and fell into a restless sleep. She awoke again at noon, filled with new uneasiness. The dizziness that had afflicted her for almost a week seemed somehow less overwhelming. And she was hungry.

She rose and returned to the chair. The food had not fared well during her nap. The thick gravy which she had enjoyed more than the pieces of meat and vegetables was dry and unappetizing.

Carolyn stared at the unpleasant mound with growing distaste. How could she eat that? Why had she been so foolish as to delay her meal?

She began to close the drawer, and then, with sudden resignation, she opened it again. She would not attempt to eat the gravy. But the meat would still be edible. And the carrots and potatoes.

She picked the chunks of food up one by one and put them in her mouth. The gravy tasted bitter, and she wiped it away with her fingers. When all the pieces of food were gone, she stared for a moment at the

gravy. It was still too wet to move to her chamber pot.

It was not until late in the day that Carolyn recognized a change in her behavior. Usually, as soon as her single meal was over, she returned to her bed, too lethargic to remain seated in her chair. When she did drag herself to the window, she was soon overcome with fatigue. There was a circle on the wall next to the glass where she was accustomed to resting her head.

She felt hungrier, too, than she usually did. Surprised, she returned to the table. The gravy was dry forming a puddle on the bottom of the drawer, and she noticed for the first time that it was covered with a fine film of what appeared to be salt. Timidly, she touched the chalky substance and brought her fingers to her lips. Laudanum!

The taste was bittersweet, and she wondered, with sudden shock, how she could ever have confused it with any other taste. Suddenly, weak, she lowered herself into her chair.

She could see it now. William had been using the drug to keep her under his control!

For the first time in a week, she felt a surge of anger. How did he dare?

The answer came immediately. He would dare anything to achieve his ends! And who was there to stop him?

She sat for a while, staring at the contents of the drawer. Then, spurred into sudden action, she rose and scraped the gravy into her chamber pot. She knew Katie's habits well. The girl would never think to question the contents of that unsavory bowl.

The next day she followed the same pattern. Whatever the food, she transferred it first into the drawer. Fortunately Katie remained preoccupied, and she made no attempt to supervise her mistress's dinner.

When Katie had left the room, Carolyn picked out whatever solids she could. Meat, carrots, potatoes, all

were nourishing to her. The rest, especially the gravies, went into the chamber pot.

With each passing day Carolyn found her senses sharpened. At first she was aware of an ache in her abdomen, which she attributed to the sudden elimination of the laudanum. The pain was often severe, driving her to her bed, and her behavior, her obvious discomfort, seemed to have no effect on Katie.

On the third day Carolyn, too sick to eat, watched Katie carry the dish out without it being touched. She repressed an urge to call out, and for a time after the door was locked, she lay sobbing in her bed. Katie knew she was being given the medicine! She knew! And she had no objections! She had hoped that Katie might be trusted, and now she knew she was alone.

Through the remainder of the day, she comforted herself with the knowledge that she was better off with the knowledge of her maid's perfidy than she would have been had she trusted the girl with her confidence. As for the food she had missed, she felt sure that on the morrow there would be more. If she went without the laudanum for more than a day, it would wear off.

From then on, her foremost thought was to keep Katie in the dark regarding her newfound sanity. She greeted the girl each morning with the same blank expression. She sat immobile while the clean-up chores were done and except for the momentary rush of activity when she scraped the food into the drawer, she gave all appearances of eating normally.

Remembering how often she had returned to her bed before Katie left the room, she continued the practice. But as soon as the door was locked, she was on her feet and at the window.

On the fifth day of her watch, her vigil was rewarded. Far in the distance, at the edge of the town, she saw a movement of men. A burst of gunfire filled the air with plumes of smoke. The fighting had begun again. When she retired for the night, her heart was

beating with new hope. Maybe the rebels would come in time to stop William in his diabolical plans. Maybe she would be saved, after all!

When morning came, her hopes were crushed. Katie arrived earlier than usual, dropped the tray of food on the table, and scurried about the room. Carolyn emptied the food into the drawer while the servant girl was gone with the chamber pot. She put a piece of meat into her mouth while Katie emptied the water pitcher. Then, abruptly, the time for eating was over. When Katie returned to the room, she carried Carolyn's warmest cape.

"Time to go, mum. Come on, stand up like a good girl and let me get you into your robe."

Chafing at the condescension in her maid's voice, Carolyn did as she was told. She cast a last longing glance back at the table as she was led toward the door. Would William come now and discover what she had been doing?

Her fears were quickly over. William stood waiting for her at the foot of the stairs. He was dressed in his best uniform, and over it he wore a heavy cloak. He He tapped his hand impatiently against his leg as the two women stumbled down to his side.

"Can you move her no faster, Katie?" An edge of irritation sharpened his voice.

"I'm doin' the best I can, sir!" Katie had never spoken to William with such petulance before, and Carolyn glanced at him in surprise. But he showed no response. Instead he turned and moved toward the open doorway.

Carolyn let her foot catch on the corner of the carpet and she almost fell, pulling Katie with her. With a curse William leaped back into the hallway. His arms went down, and Carolyn was swept into the air.

The fresh air brought a rosy glow to her face and an even greater awareness to her mind. How good the

freshness felt! She resisted the impulse to inhale deeply, to pull as much as she could of the wonderful freshness into her lungs. Deliberately she let herself sink further into William's arms.

He stepped lightly down the stairs to where a carriage waited. As he reached the cobbled street, a lackey rushed to his side and took his burden from his arms. Carolyn felt herself lifted up—and then she was deposited on a seat inside the carriage. So far, she had succeeded in her pretense.

Katie climbed up beside her, blocking one of the doors, and then the carriage was closed. A breeze brushed its way through the open window, and Carolyn sneezed.

Immediately Katie was over her, pulling the cape closer, tucking a blanket over her arms. Carolyn submitted to the care with growing impatience. The crisp air, the chill of the wind, both gave her pleasure. If only it were later in the morning! She could see far too little in the gray dimness that surrounded her.

A horse came alongside the carriage and William mounted. Then there was the sound of a whip cracking somewhere ahead of her, and the carriage began to move. Aware that Katie was watching her closely, Carolyn let her head drop on her chest. Until she could decide what could be done, she was safe only while she feigned sleep.

Her mind was racing wildly. How many streets lay between William's house and the edge of town? Were there hiding places that might shelter her if suddenly she opened the door beside her and broke for freedom?

Slowly she moved her hand toward the door handle. Katie did not move. She let her head roll to one side and glanced at the silent girl. Katie was staring out of the window.

With renewed courage Carolyn grabbed the handle and twisted. It did not move. She was still trapped as

surely as if she remained in her room. The carriage door was locked!

Then hope returned once more. Katie was snoring! Lulled by the sway of the carriage, and confident that her prisoner was helpless, she had succumbed to exhaustion.

Carolyn leaned over and felt the other door. The handle moved easily in her hand. If she could move swiftly enough to climb over Katie before she awoke, escape was still possible!

Through half-closed eyes she viewed the passing scene. The houses loomed dark around her, half-smothered in a soupy fog. Each time they passed a street lamp, the faint glow lit the inside of the carriage, sending black shadows racing around her. The clattering of the horses' hoofs sounded ghostly, as if they came from another world.

As they passed a narrow alley, Carolyn cast a quick glance into its shadows. If she ran suddenly into the darkness, would she be able to get away? There were barrels behind which she could hide—

With a wave of despair, she abandoned such a possibility. She would be recaptured for sure. William and his aides, all on horseback, could chase her far faster than she could run.

Yet she knew that her time to get free was limited. She could tell from the change in the air and the sounds of the sea that they were heading in the direction of the wharf. William was taking her to a ship.

Gradually another sound penetrated her consciousness. Gunfire! Behind the carriage, in the distance, fighting was going on!

The hammering of hoofbeats drowned out all other noises, and a red-coated soldier galloped beside the carriage. William drew his reins and fell beside him. "More trouble?"

"Yes, sir!" The soldier's voice held a touch of panic. "They've broken through to the north. You'd best take

the south road to the harbor. Our troops still have that section of town under guard."

Carolyn repressed an urge to cheer. They were coming to rescue her! Surely, among the soldiers pounding on the city gates, George was ready to seek her out!

The soldier saluted and turned to go. William spoke a sharp command and galloped to the head of the small caravan. Carolyn wondered if his desire was to protect himself or to defend the loyal men who followed him—and herself.

The clump of hoofs on the stone pavement continued. The carriage turned once to the left, and then again to the right. The light was growing brighter.

Once more Carolyn reached over Katie's relaxed body. But before she could turn the handle of the carriage door, a rider moved up alongside her, blocking her route to freedom. She was trapped again. Despairing, she settled back into her seat. Maybe later.

Now a new sound assailed her ears, one she had heard only on those rare times when William had taken her for a drive to the wharfs to watch the ships as they rode in harbor. The scent of salt teased her nostrils. They had reached the bay.

Carolyn shuddered. Her chance was past. Now she would have no opportunity to get away. She had wondered at the destination of their journey. Now she knew. Soon she would be taken aboard ship and on her way to England. William had won after all.

Overwhelmed by sudden despair, Carolyn began to weep. She recalled how often, in her childhood, she had dreamed of taking just such a trip across the harbor to a waiting vessel. Even as late as a few weeks ago, before William told her the truth about her father, she would have welcomed the thought of a voyage to London.

Now she knew only that she had no wish to leave her homeland. She wanted only to see George's face once more, to feel his hands close over hers. The face

of her mother floated into her thoughts, and she sobbed. Why had she been so blind? What demon had possessed her, hiding William's perfidy? Or had she known what he was all along, but ignored the knowledge?

She opened her eyes and looked about. The docks were filled with soldiers waiting to embark. Unless her fortune took a sudden change, she would have no opportunity to escape until she was on board the ship —if, indeed, one came then.

Yet, overwhelmed as she was with despair, she did not for a moment consider accepting her fate. She would prefer to die in the cold water rather than to live under William's cruel control until they reached England. For now she was certain that as soon as the wedding ceremony was completed and all necessary papers signed by her, William would find a way to kill her.

She glanced surreptitiously at Katie. The girl was dozing, confident that her charge was helpless under the control of the laudanum. Cautiously Carolyn raised her head and leaned back against the cushions. The harbor lay dead ahead.

There were five ships at anchor, all in the process of taking cargo and passengers. A quick glance told her that all but one were military vessels designed for the transportation of soldiers. The fifth was a typical merchant ship, with a broad row of windows at the stern. Her mother had told her that passengers were housed in the cabins that faced the sea.

Once more she closed her eyes. "Dear God"—her prayer was silent—"give me the strength! Help me now, for I cannot do what I must do without your guidance."

She felt Katie's hand prod her side. "Wake up!" The voice was brittle with excitement. "Time to get out!"

Pretending alarm and confusion, Carolyn allowed herself to be steered across the wharf to the dock. William reached her side before she had traveled more than a few feet, and his arm supported her solicitously.

Suddenly their forward movement was halted.

"How's our lady? Do you think she can take the long voyage?" She recognized the voice. General Howe.

"Not well, my lord." William spoke with the proper concern. "She grows weaker by the day. I pray I will succeed in bringing her to England, where I can find a competent physician."

Carolyn opened her eyes. "General!" The word was barely out of her mouth when she realized her error. The general was already turning away. William looked at her with a dark frown on his face. "Willum!" Deliberately she let her voice slur. "I hurt, Willum!"

William eyed her sharply, but as she continued to speak, his smile grew smug. "It's all right, Carolyn, my love. You'll be on board ship soon. I'll do everything in my power to help you get well." His words were deliberately loud, and she realized he was speaking for ears other than her own.

With a murmur she hoped would reassure him, she let herself sink into his arms. Now was not the time to attempt an escape. She let herself be led into the longboat and settled in a seat.

When she stepped into her cabin, she was hard-pressed to resist the impulse to smile. Her prayer had been answered! It was a small cabin—but it had the one feature that meant life to her—a wide window at the rear. If it opened, she would have no trouble making her escape.

William led her to a chair and helped her to settle down. Carolyn stared dully toward the wall. Would he leave now? He had paid Katie on the dock and sent her packing back into town, so she had no other guard to fear.

There was a rumbling close by. The anchor was being raised! William stared at her in silence. Then, abruptly, he turned and walked to the door. As he left the cabin, she heard him turn a key.

Immediately she was on her feet. Tearing the coverlets from the bunk, she tied them end to end. The chair served as a support for the weight, though she had difficulty securing the heavy blankets to its frame. Then she hung one end of the makeshift rope out the open window.

She paused for a moment and then, inhaling deeply to bolster her courage, she pushed herself through the opening. Her legs slipped down the smooth length of the blanket and then she was in the water. She held onto her support for one moment as she looked around, searching for the best way to go, and then she pushed away from the ship.

Immediately she knew she had made a mistake. The water was icy cold, and the full skirt of her gown clung around her legs like a shroud. Frantically she tore at the buttons. The cold water lapped against her skin. It was too cold! She would freeze before ever she reached the shore.

Her despair passed quickly. Now was the time to show that she deserved her name! Her dress was loose now, and she kicked her legs free. Quickly she bobbed up.

She did not bother to look back to see what happened to the water-soaked cloth. Instead, her fingers numb from the cold, she pushed herself forward. Her legs tingled with each kick, and she fought for every breath.

A wave washed over her head, and she felt the darkness close over her. It would be so easy to give up! So very easy!

With a silent exclamation, she rejected so foolish a move. When her head bobbed to the surface, she

gasped for air. The next time she was pushed under by the wake of the ship, she held her breath until she once more felt the water part above her.

She surfaced again, and the water had turned her about so that she was facing the dark sea. A wave of panic threatened her, and then the ship hove into view, outlined against the sky. Lanterns swayed in the rigging, and low against the waterline she could see the blanket-rope trailing behind like a ghostly finger reaching into the water.

Sputtering, she forced herself to turn. The shore was growing closer, and as she reached the slope, she faced a new danger. Each time a wave broke on the beach it threw her forward. But when it was drawn back to sea, it pulled her along. She was getting nowhere, remaining tantalizingly close to safety, yet never near enough.

She had lost all sensation in her fingers and her legs, and she was faintly aware that she was accepting the roll of the water. She wanted desperately to go to sleep, to close her eyes, to struggle no longer.

Startled, she forced herself back to consciousness. She could not give up when she was so close! The next time the wave threw her onto the shore, she grabbed at the sand. For one breathtaking moment she held on—and then she was drawn back with the riptide.

She sputtered as she surfaced. The wave was pushing her forward again, and she paddled furiously to increase her speed. Now she touched the sand, and she forced her hands deep into the rough earth, clawing for a rock onto which she could hold. When the tug of the undertow pulled at her body, she braced herself against it. And this time she held.

Panting from exhaustion, she crawled up onto the beach. The swish of the waves against the shore blended with the intermittent sound of gunfire. She knew she had to crawl for shelter. When morning came, she would be too visible from the sea. Holding on to her

last shreds of consciousness, she pulled herself forward. But the struggle was too great. With a moan of despair she felt her arms go out from under her. Her face scraped the sand and then, at last, she lost all awareness of her danger.

Twenty-three

When the morning sun touched her body, Carolyn moaned and rolled onto her back. She was cold—terribly cold. And her bed was . . . With a start she sat up, her hands clutching at the wet sand. A gull screamed nearby and she recoiled in alarm. But there was no one around. As far as she could see, the beach was empty.

She shivered. The tide had gone out, and the water lapped at the sand far below her place of rest. As she gazed at the gentle waves, the memory of her night of terror returned.

The sun floated above the horizon, warming her icy skin. Unconsciously she brushed the sand from her breasts and arms. It clung to her like wet flour, and at last, steeling herself against the shock, she waded into the surf and rinsed it off. Then, dripping, her skin bumpy from the cold, she ran onto the beach once more and stood rubbing herself until the warmth returned.

Far in the distance were five ships, their sails dark against the pale pink of the morning sky. Fear clutched suddenly at her heart. Had William persuaded the captain of his ship to return to Boston to search for her?

Again she studied the shoreline. A heron dove low above the water, its wings flapping slowly as it glided inches above the surface. Then, with a movement so sudden she felt a start, it dove into the wave. When it surfaced again, a fish was flopping in its beak.

Carolyn watched until the bird was out of sight. Her eyes left the wild flight and dropped to the gentle waves. Fifty yards to her left something dark and moving floated in the water.

She walked toward it, her thoughts momentarily taken by her curiosity. But as she drew close, she increased her pace. The ocean had disgorged her gown, and offered it to her, wet and holding among its folds a school of tiny fish.

With a cry of delight she pulled the gown from the surf. The dripping cloth slapped against her bare legs and clung to her, but she hardly felt the discomfort. She stood for a moment clutching the dress to her, her tears mingling with the draining water. Then she ran to a rock that dominated the beach and dropped the bundle on its warm surface.

She spread it carefully, lovingly smoothing out the skirt, the long sleeves, the little ruffle that edged the waist. She could see the steam rising from the material and she followed its advance to the sky. "Dear God, thank you for saving me! And thank you for providing me with a covering!"

She looked once more up at the sky. The sun was rising higher, and as it rose, she felt its heat increase. She found shelter from the wind behind another rock, and she waited there for the sun to do its work. Once more she surveyed the beach. A cluster of sea gulls tracked aimlessly in the sand, rising suddenly on a breeze and soaring up over the water. Rocks like those among which she hid obscured her view both to the north and to the south.

Behind her, and as far as her eye could see in both directions, the woods stretched, the sun barely penetrating its darkness. When she was dressed, she would have to walk toward the forest. Somewhere in its depths she would find a clearing—and, hopefully, protection. Curling as close to the rock as she could, she closed her eyes.

She awoke again when the sun was high, and the warmth of its rays brought a glow to her skin. She pulled the gown over her head and buttoned it up. Now she could begin the search for safety.

But she found herself reluctant to leave the shore. When first she had regained consciousness, she had been forced to tend to her physical need for warmth and rest. Now, for the first time since her escape, she was able to fully appreciate her liberty.

Never had the smell of salt air been so refreshing! Never before had she fully appreciated the touch of sun against her skin. She had taken her life for granted! Had taken her liberty as a right! Now she understood what George meant when he spoke of freedom as a wonderful privilege.

She shuddered. She had come so close to losing her independence. She had been willing to give it away for the opportunity to meet the king and dance in the palace!

She recognized now what had happened to her. She had actually lost her freedom long before William confined her to her room. She had given her life over to his control. And he had taken charge as if it were his due.

Her feet dug into the damp sand. She understood, at last, what George was talking about. And he was right. She did not belong in London, constrained by corsets and restrictive rules of behavior. She wanted no more of a world in which power could be used to destroy the souls of men! Like George, she had to be free! Without liberty, she had no life at all.

William had planned to murder her. He had already begun, with his daily doses of laudanum. Once more she closed her eyes and folded her hands. Thank God she had found out in time!

Once more she gazed about her. A sound to the south drew her attention, and a figure appeared. She crouched instinctively, ready to run.

But the man who approached was walking slowly, his head lowered, his hands clasped behind his back. He had not seen her, nor did he give any impression that he was searching. Occasionally he glanced up at the sea, and when he did, she realized that his cheeks were wet with tears.

He was a tall man with broad shoulders and a dark, heavy beard that almost obscured his features. But as he approached, Carolyn felt her heart begin to race. She gasped.

He turned then and stared in her direction, his face working torturously. When he spoke, his voice was a whisper. "Carolyn?"

"George!" She was on her feet, running toward him, her arms extended. "George!"

His expression changed from sorrow to incredulity, and at last, to joy. "Carolyn! Oh, my darling!" She was in his arms, her body pressed against his. She felt his lips on hers, felt the strange roughness of his beard. And then she was aware only of his love.

They stood for a long time locked in a close embrace. When George lifted his head, she could see that he was still weeping. But now the tears were tears of joy. "Oh, Carolyn, I thought I had lost you!"

Her only response was to press herself closer in his arms.

"When I returned with a message from General Washington to the troops surrounding the city, I was told that you had been asking after me. Oh, my dearest! You should have stayed in Concord, where you would have been safe!"

"I—" She let her fingers trail over his cheeks. "I wanted to be near you. I was afraid you might be injured. Oh, George! I couldn't stay behind when you were in danger! I saw men fall!" She began to cry. "I was afraid you would be killed! I had to find out if you had survived!"

"Foolish girl! All you did was put yourself in

jeopardy! I searched the camp for you. And then I was told you had gone to Widow Burke's home, and I felt comforted. I planned to visit her—and then I was sent on another errand by the general. It was a month before I learned that you had been captured by the redcoats."

He kissed her again. "I tried many times to enter the city to rescue you. Then, fool that I was, I let myself be hit by a bullet! I wasted more months recovering from the wound while you remained in mortal danger!"

She caressed his forehead with her fingers. "Oh, where were you hit? Are you all right now?"

He chuckled. "I'm fine. It was only a leg wound, but a troublesome one, nevertheless. I questioned every citizen who escaped from the British defenses, and from them I learned that you were with William." He grimaced. "Will you forgive me? I was torn with jealousy, convinced you had put our love behind you. And then I heard that you were ill."

She told him what she had surmised about her condition, and she explained what had led to her confinement. When she finished, he pulled her again into his arms. "Had I known you were in such peril, I would have invaded the town alone! If ever I meet William Jaeger, I will ask for nothing less than the pleasure of punishing him!"

They kissed again. And then, arm in arm, they walked to the rocks and sat down. George looked down into her face. "We began the attack on the city two days ago, but it was not until yesterday that it became clear that we were beating them into the sea. I was sure William would take you with him, yet I could not leave my post to rescue you. When we reached the bay, I realized he had taken you aboard his ship. One of the merchants told me he had seen you being helped from your carriage."

He paused and stared out over the water. "I ran

to the wharf, but the ships were gone. I could see them pulling out to sea, and I thought you were lost to me forever. I tried to find a skiff, but there was none to be had. I must have seemed the fool, rushing from dock to dock, pleading with every man I met for some kind of a boat! But there were none! The redcoats had scuttled every seaworthy vessel! Every one!"

The muscles of his arm tightened. "I tried to swim to the ships, but they were moving too swiftly. And so, at last, I had to admit my defeat. I stood helpless on the shore, watching my life sail away! I was tormented by the knowledge that you were not well! And I prayed that you would survive until I could take ship and come to England to rescue you."

His lips were on hers, and when he lifted his head, he kissed her lightly on her cheek. "Thank God you escaped! I'll never let you go again!"

Her arms encircled his neck and she pulled him down to her. Then, with a sudden urgency, she began to unbutton her gown. George rose and removed his breeches and shirt. When he lay back beside her, the warmth of his body shielded her from the cool breeze.

He entered her gently, pressing between her legs, and then he lay quietly above her. "Oh, my dearest!" His breath was warm against her cheek. "I thought I would never again hold you in my arms!"

She felt the tingling grow within her until her entire body was alive to his touch. He slipped into her consciousness, filled her thoughts and her emotions. Sparks, like tiny explosions, followed the movement of his hands over her shoulders.

When he kissed her eyelids, lights flashed in her brain. Her fingers tingled. She moved with him now, unaware that her body had motion of its own. His breathing quickened, and with it his thrusts grew stronger. Then, with a violence that echoed her own passion, he gasped her name.

She felt the flow of her life force blend with his

own. And she knew then that she could never have been happy with William, even if he had treated her well. She belonged to George. She was his woman! And in that possession, she found herself. In her loyalty and love for him, she was free.

They lay for a time without moving. Slowly Carolyn felt a calmness creep into her soul. The weight of his body on hers was comforting.

He rolled onto the rock and lay beside her. She turned toward him, sheltering her abdomen from the cool breeze that lapped at the moisture between her legs. The musky odor of his body stirred her senses. She kissed his shoulder and let her head rest there, the sound of the surf suddenly loud in her ears.

His voice cut through the stillness. "My darling, we must marry. Your father and brother are in Boston. We must return there now, so I can get your father's consent."

"Mine, then, is not enough?"

"Oh, my dearest, it is more than enough! But the war will not last forever, and we cannot live our lives in isolation. Do you fear that your father will refuse to give his approval?"

She smiled and raised herself on her elbow. "I can see now that he was trying to save me for you all along. Now I know why he did not approve of William."

"He has spoken to me of the man. It was he who assured me that no matter what appearances might be, you were not safe in William's hands. He and your brother tried as I did to effect your escape, but they feared an outright invasion might put you in greater danger. Come." He rose and began to pull on his clothing. "I know for a fact that they both are still searching for a boat. We must let them share my joy that you are safe!"

"And can we be married here? Now?"

His brow lowered. "That I doubt. But your father

has planned to go to New York to see that your mother is well—and to inform her of your misfortune. Now his voyage will be far more pleasant. You must go back with him. If we can find a pastor to marry us before you leave, it will be done. But whatever happens, you must go to New York. You will be safe in the Fairchild mansion."

"Must I leave you again?"

"Not for long, my love." He drew her into his arms. "Not for long! Surely you understand that our own happiness must take second place to the success of the fighting!"

She looked up into his face. She had no quarrel with his enthusiasm. She shared his desire for a quick and successful end to the war. He smiled down at her, and she returned his smile. "Be careful, my dearest!" She realized the foolishness of her warning as she spoke. If he was fighting, he could not take care!

She would be safe in the Fairchild estate—and her lover, her heart, would be risking his life for freedom. She closed her eyes and prayed, fervently, that he would survive whatever lay ahead. And then he put his arm around her waist and led her toward the distant city.

Twenty-four

"Let now thy servant depart in peace. . . ." Carolyn bowed her head as the pastor spoke the words of benediction. When she looked up, she met her mother's eyes across the newly filled grave.

Genevive had been ailing when Carolyn, Roy, and their father returned from Boston. George had not traveled as far as New York, but had left his companions to take the road north toward General Benedict Arnold's encampment. Carolyn had huddled close in his embrace, had kissed him one last time and then, reluctantly, had released him. As he rode away, she knew she would not be truly alive until he returned once more.

She had forgotten concerns for her own happiness, however, when they arrived at the Fairchild manor. Her father led the way up the curving access road, and when he saw Elizabeth standing at the top of the long stone staircase that led to the Fairchild mansion, he ran ahead and swept her into his arms. When Roy and Carolyn stood beside him, he included them in his embrace.

It was Roy who voiced the question. "Where's Grandma Genevive?"

"Upstairs, in her bed. She has never recovered from the general's death. I fear she wants nothing more than to join him."

With a cry of alarm, Carolyn was in the house, running up the curved stairs that led to the bed-

chambers. She paused at the door to the general's room. Genevive lay on one side of the big bed, as if reserving room for her departed husband. Never had she appeared more frail. Her skin was like fine parchment, and with the sun shining behind her, it seemed to glow.

She smiled as Carolyn entered the room. "Elizabeth! How nice of you to visit! How is the baby?"

For a moment Carolyn was confused. Then, with a rush, the truth of her grandmother's weakness dawned upon her. "I'm not Elizabeth, grandma! I'm Carolyn! Don't you remember?" She approached the bed and stood beside it.

Genevive lifted a delicate hand and touched Carolyn's arm. "Carolyn? But . . ." She paused, her face working, and then, suddenly, a smile of recognition lit her face. "Of course! How foolish of me!" A sadness filled her eyes, and Carolyn realized that once more her grandmother was made aware that she was alone. The general was dead.

But the sadness passed. Once more Genevive smiled into the girl's face. "Sit down, Elizabeth. You must tell me all about yourself! I hope you can stay. Arthur has missed you. It is not easy to lose a daughter we have had for so short a time."

Carolyn sat beside the old woman, thankful that though she had asked her to speak, Genevive did not press the demand for conversation. It was clear that the lonesome widow had lapsed once more into a dreamworld in which her husband still was alive.

There was a noise at the door and Elizabeth stepped into the room. "Carolyn?"

"Yes, mama?"

"You mustn't be too upset by Grandma Genevive's condition. She has spent forty years of her life with the general. She has little desire to live without him."

Robert and Roy stepped into the room behind Elizabeth, and all three clustered around the bed.

Carolyn, kneeling beside her grandmother, had the strange feeling of déjà vu.

But she was spared the heartrending farewells that had preceded the colonel's death. The dying woman had lapsed into a coma. Elizabeth helped Carolyn to her feet and took her place beside the bed. "Go with your father, my dear. I don't think it will be very long now. She wanted so to see you three once more."

"But—" Carolyn frowned. "She didn't recognize me!"

"In her heart she did, I am sure. Don't distress yourself. She will soon be with the general again."

Silently the three filed from the room. Roy sobbed, and rubbed his nose with the back of his hand. For one moment, Carolyn was tempted to reproach him for such uncouth behavior, and then the realization returned. Such pettiness was out of place at such a solemn occasion. Roy's voice broke. "Is she going to die, then?"

"Yes. But we must not weep for her. As your mother said, she is at a loss without the general beside her. She cannot accept the fact that she is alone. Your mother told me that the change began almost as soon as the general was laid to rest. She kept insisting that he would be returning. Once she even persuaded the servants to prepare a banquet for his return. And once, not too long ago, your mother found her talking to the general as if he were standing beside her."

Carolyn shuddered. "Was it his ghost?"

"I doubt it. When your mother arrived, Genevive appeared confused—and then she allowed herself to be led back to the house. From then on, your mother dared not leave Genevive alone."

Carolyn dabbed her eyes with her kerchief. "She talked to me as if I was Mother, and asked how the baby was. It was eerie. I felt as if I were the ghost!"

Robert nodded. "One feels uneasy in the presence of a troubled mind. But we must pray that her passing is

easy. We will miss her, that is true, but she will be happier. Her life has been entwined with General Fairchild's for too long."

Carolyn had not seen Genevive alive again. The funeral service was short, led by the elderly pastor who had been Genevive's friend since first she arrived in New York.

As Carolyn met her mother's eyes over the coffin, she felt a strange peace. Her parents had been right. For Genevive, death was merciful.

Nevertheless her grandmother's death sent Carolyn into a depression that neither her parents nor her brother could penetrate. Roy tried more than once to interest his sister in some of the games they had enjoyed when they were children playing on the large estate, but Carolyn had had no heart for such frivolity.

Her father, too, had spoken to her in an attempt to cheer her spirits. When he failed, he spoke alone to her mother, and then, with a great show of enthusiasm, took Roy an a tour of the estate.

Elizabeth waited until the two men were out of sight, and then she led her daughter into the garden and sat with her on a bench facing the two silent gravestones. "Carolyn, my dear, we must talk about this. You are injuring yourself with your mourning. Surely you know that all life is temporary, a gift from God that he can take back at will. You must rise above your personal sorrow. Life goes on."

Carolyn nodded. "I know that, mother!"

"But you do not act on it. You disturb both your father and me. We, too, will die in time. I worry that you have no strength to withstand such an event. It makes us both very concerned. Tell me, why are you impervious to our comfort?"

Carolyn began to sob quietly. "I don't think it's grandma or grandpa. Not that alone, anyway. I know they're together and happy again. And I know how

lonely grandma must have been this last year. But I"—she paused—"am so worried!"

"For George?" Elizabeth kissed her daughter's cheek. "I understand your concern very well. I waited, too, as you know, for your father to return from an assignment before you were born. And I feared for his safety with equal dread."

Her hand tightened on her daughter's shoulder. "It must seem to you that I speak lightly when I urge you to be cheerful. You can see only that I have had years of happiness with your father, and that for as long as you have been aware, we have been together. But he has left us many times. Can you understand that I have feared for your father's safety each time he has been gone?"

"Oh, yes, mother. I understand. I know you love him."

"Then you will understand that I, like you, realize my own helplessness when he is away. Oh, I know that like Widow Burke I can survive without my husband. At present, at least, I would not abandon my own life were he to be killed in battle. I am still needed here. But I know that as long as he returns safely, I have a life of my own to lead—with him. The day he does not return, I will have nothing of my own. I will live on only until I can be of no more help to you and Roy."

"But"—Carolyn blushed—"you at least have had years together. You had me—and Roy."

"Yes, and your father and I comforted each other when we lost your infant sister, before Roy was born. But you, too, have memories. You know George loves you."

Carolyn's eyes widened. Elizabeth continued without a pause. "My child, do you think I can't tell? You are not the little girl you were when you left Fort Pitt. I will never ask you to tell me all that happened to you—unless you choose to speak of it. But I cannot

help but notice that my little girl has become a woman!"

Carolyn looked deep into her mother's eyes. "You knew?"

"I suspected when you and George stopped on your way to Boston. There was a tenderness in the way he behaved to you, and a gentleness in your response, that no woman who has known love could fail to see. And I could tell from your face. A girl changes deep within her when she at last becomes a true woman. Love transforms her more than it does a man. But I could see then that something worried you. You are no longer fearful that you might be barren, now, are you?"

"I was not going to say anything. It didn't seem proper. But yes, I was worried."

Elizabeth took her daughter's hand. "You are afraid now that George will not return in time?"

Carolyn felt the tightness around her heart soften. She had been so alone! But she was alone no longer. "Oh, mother! I thought you'd be angry! I . . ." She wiped a tear from her cheek. "He promised he would return within a fortnight, and he is not yet arrived. Three weeks have passed! What will I do?"

"Why, nothing! You will wait, as thousands of women have waited before you. Next Sunday will be the fourth and last time the banns must be spoken. You and George can be married at the moment he arrives, if that serves to comfort you." She held Carolyn's hands in her own. "But, my dear, if he never came back, your world would not crumble about you. Your father and I love you. And we will love your child. All the more because we are so fond of George."

Carolyn leaned against her mother's shoulder and poured out her relief. She had thought she was alone!

Elizabeth waited until the sobs subsided. "We will not speak of this to your father and Roy. Not yet. I have not told you that I faced the same worry before you were born. Yet, a man can feel quite differently about his daughter. Your father and I—" she stopped.

Some things, Carolyn realized, were too personal to speak of—even to another woman. "Just hold your peace regarding this when you speak to your father. If it becomes necessary, I will tell him."

Elizabeth stirred and stood up, pulling her daughter up with her. "Now, that is quite enough of such morbid thoughts! George will return. You must believe it. And when he does, you will be married. God willing, you will have as many years of joy as his wife as Genevive had with the general!"

As the weeks passed, Carolyn often found herself doubting her mother's words of encouragement. Each day she sat in the garden, her eyes focused on the road he would travel when—and if—he returned. And every night she retired with her despair more intense.

Robert Salford and Roy remained on the estate for a full month after the funeral, assisting in settling the estate, and arranging with the vicar for someone to look in on the two women in case the servants needed assistance.

Before they left, Roy tried once more to cheer his sister. "You are letting yourself be upset by nothing, sis." He tapped her lightly on the shoulder. "George only went on a few errands! Messengers are not in danger! It's the fighting men who run the risks!" There was a hint of pride in his voice, and he rubbed his hand on the fine beard he had refused to relinquish, even under his mother's urging.

Robert shook his head. "Roy, be easy on your sister. Would you take kindly to waiting while others did the fighting?"

Roy squared his shoulders. "Of course not! But I'm a man!"

"You are a boy—and a foolish one at that! Your sister and your mother share the same love of freedom you and I have, yet custom deems them unable to bear arms. I swear that the women who wait, not

knowing what has happened to their men, bear more than any soldier in the heat of battle!" He took Carolyn in his arms. "Take comfort, my dear. George loves you, of that I am convinced. He never flagged in his determination to rescue you from Jaeger's clutches. He will return to you now—no matter what stands in his way."

Carolyn forced a smile. She knew only too well the dangers that could beset a traveler. She stood silently as her parents embraced, as her mother kissed Roy good-bye. Then the two women stood side by side as the men mounted. When the two riders vanished over the hill, mother and daughter clasped hands and in silence returned to the empty house.

Twenty-five

He appeared unexpectedly at the gate to the estate, his clothes ragged, his walk that of an old, exhausted man. Carolyn felt her heart skip a beat when she saw him, and she ran up the path, almost tripping on her own skirt in her eagerness. "George!"

Suddenly they were face to face, and she stopped in alarm. The eyes that gazed at her from deep in the caverns beneath shaggy brows were not those of her lover! This man, despite his emaciated condition, was clearly taller than George, and his beard was black, not brown. His voice cracked when he spoke. "Ma'am, is this the Fairchild house?"

Carolyn stared for a moment, her heart unwilling to admit that she had been deceived. "Yes."

He stretched a hand toward her, and fell forward. His fingers clutched at her skirt, pulling her off balance as he landed, with a groan, on his knees. She grabbed at his shoulders to keep him from falling.

"I'm Edgar Severs, ma'am. George Nelson—has he arrived yet?"

"No! Is he all right? Speak to me, please!"

But the exertion of speaking seemed too much for the exhausted man. He released his hold on her skirt and fell forward onto the road.

Carolyn tried to lift him, but thin as he was, he was too heavy for her and so she turned and ran back to the house. She was back on the path in record time, followed by Henry, the general's private man-

servant, and Seth, his son. The two men carried the newcomer to the kitchen garden, where they placed him on a stone bench. There they stripped him of his lice-infested rags and shaved his beard.

He recovered consciousness when they submerged him in a tub, and he struggled to assist them in his scrubbing. But Henry would brook no interference. He was too well-trained a man's man to accept the role of simple helper. He persisted diligently until all the vermin were cleansed from the frail body and then he carried the newcomer up to bed.

It was Carolyn who insisted that Edgar be placed in the room next to hers, for she could not forget that before he lost consciousness, he had spoken the name of her lover. Still, she could get no more information from him during the entire first day of his stay.

Elizabeth supervised his food, limiting him to soups, and feeding him often, whenever he recovered consciousness and was able to eat. And both women took comfort in the realization that by nightfall he was sleeping normally.

He awoke during the night, screaming in terror, and the entire household awoke. Carolyn rushed to his side first, and it was her hand that calmed him and returned him to his bed. She remained beside him until she was certain that he was sleeping again, and when she retired, she left her door open so she could hear him more easily.

When she entered the room the next morning, it was clear he had no memory of his traumatic nightmare, or of his wandering in the blackness. He smiled as Carolyn entered, a tray of solid food in her hands. "Good morning, ma'am. I hope you will forgive me for the trouble I have caused you."

She smiled. "It was nothing, I assure you. Anyone would do as much. Besides, you spoke of George."

Edgar's face grew solemn. "You are wrong when you say anyone would treat me as well. I have traveled

miles through enemy territory. There were many who would have liked to return me to my prison—or kill me—had they known of my passage."

She tried to conceal her impatience, but he seemed hardly aware of the torment he caused her. "You and the other lady—is she your mother? Are you Carolyn Salford?"

She sighed in relief. She would not have to press the question. "Yes. Don't you remember, you asked already if this was the Fairchild house."

He shook his head. "Mistress Salford, I bring you news of George Nelson."

She clutched at the bed post. "What is it? Is he alive?"

"Aye, he's alive—or at least he was when last I saw him. We managed to escape together, but we separated on the chance that we would be safer traveling singly. He has not yet arrived here?"

Carolyn blanched. "Escape? You were in prison? I don't understand. George went only to the north, with a message for General Benedict Arnold!"

"Aye, that he did. And he delivered it successfully —or so he informed me. His trouble began when he prepared to return to New York." Edgar's jaw tightened. "Aye, and it was my fault, I fear!"

Carolyn dropped into a chair, clutching at the arms to keep from fainting. "Please! Don't torture me! What happened to George?"

"I'm afraid, ma'am, he has been a prisoner of the British. We suffered together on the ship *Gaspee,* locked in the heat of the hold. Men dropped around us like flies."

She stared into the dark, haunted eyes. "Tell me! What happened? How did George get into such trouble?"

" 'Twas I who persuaded him to travel back on the newly launched *Freedom's Maid* as a passenger, and if necessary as an additional guard. I convinced

him that the voyage by sea would not only be swift, but would also be far safer than horseback. And then, he was well aware of the importance of protecting the cargo of munitions."

He pulled himself up and sat braced by the pillows. "To shorten my story, for I see you are eager for its close, we were waylaid and captured! Most of the crew was killed in the fight, and the rest of us were carried by the *Edward* to the *Gaspee,* where we were put in irons and thrown into the hold. Fortunately they removed the irons the next day, though they did nothing else to alleviate our suffering."

Carolyn pressed her hand to her breast. "How did you escape?"

"George and I worked out a plan after we had been in prison for not quite a week. We saw that one man who was driven mad by the lice and the stench of the hold was permitted to drown when he threw himself overboard. The next night we pretended to get into a fight. We raised quite a ruckus, and then, when everyone was watching, we moved close to the railing. It was easy to pretend to stumble as I swung at him, and we both simply tumbled overboard. We dove deep and surfaced as close to the hold as we could. We remained there until nightfall, and then we swam to shore."

Carolyn struggled to contain her impatience. Edgar ate in silence, and when he was finished, he put the dish aside. "Thank you, ma'am, for the food. It has been a long time since I ate so well."

"Please continue. What happened after you reached the shore?"

"We dragged ourselves up on the shore and rested. I think we both had expected to be free of the lice after such a dunking, but we were not so fortunate. The beasties were with us still, and remained, with me at least, until your man cleansed me."

Carolyn leaned forward. "Ah, yes. What happened." He smiled and continued his tale. "We decided to

separate, for we knew that we would be passing through enemy territory. Long Island, you know, is rife with loyalists."

Carolyn nodded. "Yes, I know. So is New York."

"Aye, but thankfully I knew the Fairchild estate would offer me shelter." He cleared his throat. "We felt it important that one of us get through to notify people here of the loss of *Freedom's Maid.* Now that I am recovered, I must hurry on. If Captain Barry of the *Lexington* can overtake the vessel, he might be able to recover the munitions."

"Yes, but please, what more can you tell me of George?"

"Blessed little, I fear. We separated, as I said. I was fortunate enough to encounter a groom who, though his master was a staunch loyalist, shared the longing for liberty that possesses so many these days. His name is Freddy, and I will be indebted to him for the rest of my life."

"He helped you?"

"Aye. He guided me to a one-man skiff and pointed me in the direction of New York. I have had more trouble reaching you since I landed than I did during my short stay on Long Island."

Carolyn had no need to ask what his trouble had been. The roads leading into the city were patrolled by redcoats, and most of the natives of the town were supporters of the crown.

"What is the message you bring me from George?"

"Only this. He says you should not be frightened. He will return." She showed no pleasure at his words. "Please believe me. I am certain he will. He is a strong man—and a brave one."

"But you are here—and he has not yet come! Surely that can mean only one thing." She could not bring herself to continue.

Edgar smiled, and she realized suddenly that were he not so wan, he would be handsome. "Don't allow

yourself to despair. If he is not as fortunate as I and he has to traverse the entire length of the island, he may be another fortnight on his journey."

Carolyn forced a smile. Maybe he was right. And even if he were not, it did no good to show her sorrow. Not yet. Not as long as the slightest hope remained.

Yet despite Edgar's assurances, Carolyn found it difficult to keep her spirits high. Each passing day saw her guest draw closer to full recovery. And after a week of careful nursing and healthful meals, he was back on his feet, ready to return to the battle.

"I'm a seaman, ma'am," he explained to Carolyn and Elizabeth as he prepared to depart. "But I can shoot a musket no matter what lies beneath my feet." He rested his hands on Carolyn's shoulders. "Don't give up hope. I'm sure he will return."

Carolyn nodded, but she was careful to keep her eyes averted. He had spoken thus many times during the week of his stay, but she had ceased to believe him. It seemed impossible to her that George could have failed to reach home in all that time.

Yet when she waved her last farewell to Edgar and turned to join her mother, she realized she was not yet willing to abandon all expectations of George's return. She told herself that Long Island was a big island, that he would have to travel carefully to avoid being captured. "Mother." She took Elizabeth's hand in hers. "Do you think George has a chance?"

Elizabeth squeezed her daughter's fingers. "Of course, my dear. You must never give up hope. It is all you have—right now."

In the days that followed, Carolyn continued her watch. She rode each day around the estate, hoping to encounter George in her wandering. She felt certain he would not appear on the road, for the redcoats seemed to multiply, and more than once she saw a contingent ride past the iron gates.

When she wasn't on her horse, she sat at her cham-

ber window, her eyes sweeping the perimeter of the open land. Elizabeth joined her at times, attempting, with light conversation, to keep discouragement away. And when her mother was nearby, Carolyn pretended far more optimism than she actually felt.

Edgar had left on Sunday, after the morning service, and when the next Sunday arrived, Carolyn finally admitted to herself that George must be dead. Her mind touched on the thought timidly, aware that her heart rebelled. And then, with a sigh of resignation, she mounted up for her usual search. Until she had proof of his death, in her heart she would continue to think of him as alive.

When night came, she found rest impossible. She lay staring at the ceiling, in her thoughts reviewing every place she had searched during the day. Had he passed out somewhere in the woods, and she failed to notice him? The thought brought her instantly alert. Where would he go, if he wished to enter the estate without being seen by the soldiers?

She rose, pulled on a dressing gown, and walked to the window. The moon shone brightly over the green of the carefully tended lawn. In the distance the forest formed a circle, the tall trees blocking out any sign of the road. Only down the length of the entry path could she see the gate—and faintly, the white line of the highway.

A chicken hawk circled over the lawn and pounced suddenly on a small creature that ran silently—and futilely—toward its hole. She hardly saw the tiny sacrifice. Once more she was searching her mind for the entry George might use.

Suddenly her body stiffened. Pulling on her slippers, she ran down the stairs. How foolish! She had been riding all about, and she had never thought to examine the stream than ran through the back of the estate! There she had played hide-and-seek with Roy. And there the fence line was broken.

She found George just inside the barrier, lying face down, his hands out before him, as if he were trying to pull himself forward as he fell. She gasped, "George!" and knelt beside him.

There was no reply. Clutching at her breast, she lowered her head to his chest. He was still breathing —and his heart was beating feebly.

She rose and stood for a moment, undecided. Then she ran toward the house. When she reached the kitchen door, she swung it open, calling loudly for help. Henry and Seth were beside her almost immediately, rubbing the sleep from their eyes. Her mother came down the stairs, her robe trailing behind her.

"It's George! I've found him! He's here! And he's alive!" Without looking back, Carolyn hurried out again and ran into the woods. She could hear the others following behind.

The two manservants lifted George carefully and carried him to the garden. In the silver moonlight, George's face appeared almost white, and his beard failed to cover the gaunt hang of his cheeks.

The men moved swiftly, stripping the thin body of all its rags. Henry shaved George while Seth burned the clothing and fetched a robe from General Fairchild's wardrobe. Together they scrubbed his body until they were sure they had eliminated all the vermin with which he had been infected. And then, at last, Henry picked up the emaciated body and carried it into the house.

Carolyn spent the rest of the night at his side. She was dozing when he at last opened his eyes. "Carolyn?" His voice reflected the confusion in his face.

"Yes, my darling. It's me! I'm here beside you!"

A smile lit his face. "I'm not dreaming?" He touched her cheek. "No, I cannot be. In my dreams, I did not smell the sweet scent of your perfume. And in my dreams you did not cry." He frowned. "Why are you crying? I'm back! We can be married now!"

She leaned down and rested her head on his shoulder. It was so thin—so bony! Then her eyes met his. He would grow strong again.

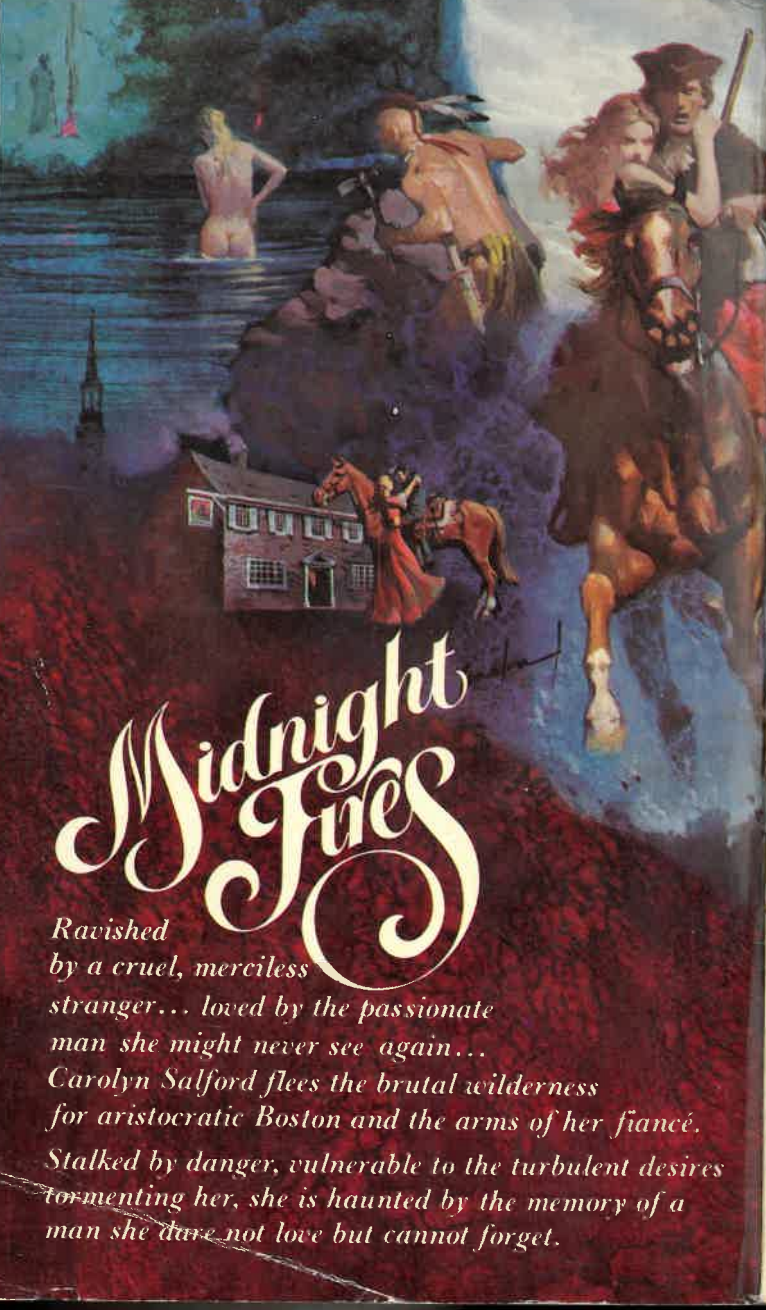
She gasped. He would grow strong. And when he did, he would leave her once more. Like Edgar, her father, and Roy, he would return to the fighting.

His hand trailed down her cheek and touched her lips. "Please, my dear, don't worry any more! I'm here now. That's all that matters!"

She took his hand in hers. "Mother has sent for the vicar. Are you angry that I wish to be wed even before you are on your feet again?"

He smiled and shook his head. "I could never be angry with you, my dear. And certainly I would not be angry at such news. I have dreamed of making you my wife!"

She raised his hand to her lips. "I know you will have to leave me again. There is no other way—until the war is done. But we will at least have a week together. And you will grow strong quickly." As she pressed her lips against his, she repressed a happy smile. She would tell him of her secret later, when she could inform him that his *wife* was expecting his child!



Midnight Fires

Ravished by a cruel, merciless stranger... loved by the passionate man she might never see again... Carolyn Salford flees the brutal wilderness for aristocratic Boston and the arms of her fiancé.

Stalked by danger, vulnerable to the turbulent desires tormenting her, she is haunted by the memory of a man she dare not love but cannot forget.